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Public Housing in Winnipeg's North End: The Case of the Lord Selkirk Park Housing Development by Jim Silver

The Lord Selkirk Park public housing development in Winnipeg's North End, located just west of Main St. between Dufferin and Selkirk Avenues, is often cited as an example of what is wrong with public housing developments. A better approach would be to see the Development, as it is called by those in the area, as an asset, with the potential to provide to its tenants not only good quality housing, but also a range of life-affirming opportunities.

While large, inner city public housing projects like Lord Selkirk Park have everywhere been plagued with problems, the cause of the problems is not public housing itself. The cause of the problems associated with public housing - in large cities throughout the USA and Canada - is that they have become 'housing of last resort' for very low-income people, and therefore home to a highly concentrated and often racialized form of poverty. This in turn is attributable to dramatic changes in North America's urban political economy over the last quarter-century and more, and associated changes in government policies.

There is a solution. With public investment in educational and employment opportunities and related supports, Lord Selkirk Park could become, for low-income inner-city families, a place of opportunity and hope, rather than a place of poverty and despair. That is the goal to which we should aspire.

The History of the North End, and the Birth of the Development

The story of the Lord Selkirk Park Housing Development is best seen in the context of the history of Winnipeg's North End. The North End was originally the home of the mostly Eastern European workers who fueled the city's great economic boom of the early 20th century. They located in the North End where the jobs then were, in small, cheaply-built houses on cramped lots constructed by developers looking for quick profits. Inadequate housing has always been a North End problem. In addition, the pre-Second World War North End and its residents were stigmatized by the city's Anglo majority and

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Anglo ruling class. Despite the rich and vibrant culture created by the largely Eastern European and Jewish workers of the North End, they were discriminated against, referred to disparagingly as 'hunkies', 'bohunks', 'polacks' and more. At the same time, the North End was starved of the public resources needed to improve the housing stock and life chances of its residents.

When the combination of post-Second World War suburbanization and the relaxing of discrimination against Eastern Europeans and Jews made relocation possible, vast numbers of those most able to do so left the North End for the suburbs. The already inadequate housing deteriorated further. Much was bought up by slum landlords uninterested in maintenance and repairs. Those people in the worst financial circumstances and with the fewest economic prospects congregated where cheap housing was most readily available. The worst of these areas was around Jarvis Ave. off Main St., and this area - the Salter-Jarvis area - became home to Winnipeg's first 'urban renewal' project, the Lord Selkirk Park Housing Development.

Urban renewal brought problems. The still healthy part of the neighbourhood was bulldozed; most of those relocated did not experience improved housing; and the new Development was starved of the social spending that was needed to make it a success - as had always been the case in the North End.

Despite this, the first tenants in Lord Selkirk Park were happy with their new accommodations. This has been the experience everywhere in North America - large, inner city public housing projects worked well in their early years.

Why Have Problems Emerged in Large Public Housing Developments?

When the problems emerged, it was not because of public housing as such; it was because of broader forces. These can be thought of in terms of two levels of analysis. First, public housing has become 'housing of last resort', concentrating large numbers of the poorest of the poor. It is the concentration of poverty that is the problem, not public housing. The concentration of poverty was the result of a process - the pattern of which is everywhere the same - by which changes in policy resulted in public housing projects becoming the home not of low-income working families, with a minority of tenants on social assistance, as was initially the case, but of families on social assistance, with a minority of tenants in the workforce, as is now the case. Public housing projects throughout North America became home to concentrated, racialized poverty, and to all of the associated problems.

A still broader level of analysis involves a consideration of what caused these concentrations of racialized poverty. Because public housing was linked to the process of 'slum' removal - part of the 'urban renewal' that dominated city planning from the late 1940s to the late 1960s - it was located in inner cities. Inner cities throughout North America suffered from the process of suburbanization, which resulted in the 'hollowing out' of the inner city - those most able to move did so; businesses and social infrastructure followed - leaving behind those least financially able to move. This was followed by the dramatic economic restructuring of the past 30 years and more, which included a de-industrialization which has removed from inner cities the very kinds of decently-paid jobs that would otherwise have enabled many of those now among the poor to pull themselves out of poverty.

In Winnipeg, at the front end of this continent-wide process, beginning in the early 1960s, Aboriginal people began slowly at first, and then in waves, to move to the city. Most were poorly prepared for modern urban life, having lived in rural and often remote communities without adequate educational opportunities and without much experience in the paid labour force, and having been subjected to the harm created by colonization. Faced with unrelenting discrimination and racism - a constant in Winnipeg's history - upon their arrival in the city, they congregated where housing was least expensive - in the inner city, and particularly in the Salter-Jarvis area. The combination of their lack of education and experience, the harm caused to them by colonization, the disappearance of well-paid jobs, and the discrimination and racism that they faced, led to high rates of poverty and associated problems. These were made the worse by the continued inadequacy of public investment aimed at poverty alleviation, an inadequacy accentuated by the public funding cutbacks that started in earnest in the late 1970s-early 1980s in response to the changing global economy.

It is these broader issues - the changes in the global economy and its de-industrializing effects, the cutbacks in public spending, the severe disadvantages faced by a growing urban Aboriginal population - that led to the concentration of racialized poverty in Winnipeg's inner city, just as it did in large urban centres throughout North America. Public housing, located as it was in the inner city, was in effect asked to respond to the damage created by these broader forces. And so public housing became 'housing of last resort' for those most adversely affected by the dramatic changes of the late 20th century. To conclude from all of this that public housing is the problem is to confuse cause and effect.

What follows from this analysis is that we ought to view large public housing projects differently than many have done in recent years. First, public housing is not the problem. On the contrary, public housing ought to be seen as part of the solution. It is part of the solution because it offers good quality low-income rental housing at a time when that is in perilously short supply. Second, the problems associated with public housing have deep roots that go far back in time, and thus will not be solved quickly. Any solution in Lord Selkirk Park must be a long-term solution, one that promotes and supports tenants' involvement, and builds their capacities and their self-confidence and self-esteem.

This is a path now being embarked upon in the Development, led by the North End Community Renewal Corporation. The work done to date is no guarantee of future success. Much hard work remains. But finally, after decades of neglect, the Development is moving, however slowly, in a positive direction.

What Should Be Done in Lord Selkirk Park?

The recommendations below arise from the preceding analysis. They are not intended to displace the preferences expressed by the tenants of Lord Selkirk Park, which should be the basis of a strategy to revitalize the Development. However, we can learn from the lessons of history, and from the experience elsewhere.

1. Do Not Tear Down nor Even Physically Re-design the Development

Large, inner city public housing projects throughout North America are being torn down and replaced with mixed-income housing, resulting in most cases in a net loss of low-income rental units. Winnipeg cannot afford to lose low-income rental housing. The better approach is to view the Development as an asset. It represents a significant number of affordable rental housing units at a time when, and in a place where, the demand for such housing far outstrips the supply.

2. Focus on Developing the Social Infrastructure in and Around the Development, as the North End Community Renewal Corporation (NECRC) Has Begun To Do

The problem in large public housing projects is the concentration of poverty. This needs to be addressed directly, by engaging tenants, in community development fashion, in solving their own problems, and providing them with the supports they need to do so. Marginalized, low-income people need social supports and a social infrastructure to enable them to realize their human potential. This is what the NECRC has

begun to do by laying the foundations for the creation of the social infrastructure that will enable residents of the Development to be actively engaged in solving their own problems.

3. Create a More Focused, and More Clear, Sense of Direction For The Work Now Being Done in the Development

Tenants in the Development have been consulted on numerous occasions about what they see as the problems and the solutions. What is needed now is a focus, a clear sense of direction.

One possibility is to identify the Development as a 'learning community', one in which a myriad of opportunities are created and supports provided to enable adults, youth and children to become engaged in a process of learning.

A brilliant example of what is possible is the Pathways to Education program in Toronto's Regent Park. Pathways provides tutoring, mentoring, financial assistance and a Student-Parent Support Worker program for high school students in Canada's oldest and largest public housing project. When Pathways started five years ago, in 2001, the dropout rate for Regent Park high school students was double the Toronto average; today it is better than the Toronto average. This is because of Pathways. There is no reason that Pathways, suitably modified for local conditions, could not be replicated in Lord Selkirk Park and the surrounding area.

4. Revise the Process by Which People are Admitted to the Development

Admissions policy needs to be changed to admit to the Development those who, while still poor and on social assistance and in need of low-rental housing, are able and prepared to take advantage of the opportunities created by living in a 'learning community'. This is not a call for the admission of higher-income individuals and families. Potential tenants should be screened, not for the size or source of their incomes, but for their willingness and perceived ability to take advantage of the opportunities created by a 'learning community'.

The result would be that the Development would become a place where low-income people want to live, rather than a place that people want to leave. People who want to take advantage of the opportunities and supports available at the Development would create an engaged and vibrant community.

The Development would become a demonstration of what is possible when people who want to improve their circumstances and their community - no matter

how poor and distressed they may be - are afforded the opportunities and the supports to do so.

5. Change the Rental Structure So That People Who Begin to Earn Good Incomes are not Induced to Leave

Maintain the cap or ceiling on the rent that can be paid for housing in the Development. This will have the effect of keeping at least some of those people who benefit from the opportunities and supports in Lord Selkirk Park as tenants of the Development. The result, in time, will be the creation of a mixed-income development - one in which a significant proportion of those living there are employed in the labour force. In this way the concentration of poverty will gradually be broken down.

6. Involve Employers in the Employment Development Program

Throughout the USA, innovative employment development strategies have been tried and evaluated in recent years. One of the clearest findings is that rather than focus only on the 'supply' side of the employment development equation - ie., assisting low-income people in preparing for a job - it is important to work also on the 'demand' side, by involving employers. Employers can identify the training for potential employees, and participate in designing and even delivering it. The result is a direct 'pipeline' from training to employment. This approach would mean scaling up and modifying the current, fledgling employment development program at the Development.

7. Create Childcare Spaces For All Those Participating in the 'Learning Community'

One of the most important supports in a 'learning community' is the provision of adequate and affordable childcare to enable parents to take advantage of opportunities. A childcare centre could also create opportunities for the development of parenting skills, for volunteering, and for training and employment.

8. Develop Strategies Specifically Aimed at Improving Safety

The recommendations above will improve safety in the Development by getting at the social determinants of crime. In addition, however, specific strategies aimed at providing opportunities to gang members and prospective gang members are needed. Exactly what these would look like is best determined by gang members themselves, and those who work closely with them. It is important to provide to gang members real choices about their lives, by creating opportunities to live well in a non-gang environment.

9. Build More Public Housing In Order to Increase the Supply of Low-Income Rental Units

Large, 1960s-style public housing units have acquired a negative reputation. But the problem is not public housing. We need more, not less, public housing. Far from bulldozing large public housing projects - as is being done in other North American centres, with a huge net loss of low-income rental units - we should be embarking upon a concerted effort to significantly increase the total supply of good quality public housing available to meet the needs of the large numbers of low-income people in Winnipeg who need it. With a greater supply of good quality public housing, there would be less need for particular housing projects to become 'housing of last resort' for those in greatest need, and the problems that arise from the concentration of poverty would be eased.

This CCPA Review is based on the following longer paper: Jim Silver. North End Winnipeg's Lord Selkirk Park Public Housing Development: History, Comparative Context, Prospects (Winnipeg: CCPA-MB., 2006). The paper is available at www.policyalternatives.ca or by contacting the CCPA-MB office.

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