

Good Places to Live

I have been heavily influenced in the writing of this book by my ongoing experience at Lord Selkirk Park (LSP), a 314-unit public housing project in Winnipeg's low-income North End. When I began work there, most community workers offered a bleak assessment of prevailing conditions, and I was originally affected by this negative disposition. However, the more I became involved at LSP, the more positively I have grown to feel about the place and its residents. Working closely with many people in the community, and guided by community development principles (Silver and Loxley 2007) and by the expressed interests and needs of residents of LSP, a small group of community workers has managed to play a positive role in the creation of a number of institutions. Lord Selkirk Park is already in some ways a different place than it was in 2005, and although many problems still remain, it will continue to improve as a place to live as long as we and the residents who live there are able to continue on the path that we are now on.

The case for optimism was made especially clear to me at the June 18, 2010, graduation ceremony for eleven adult learners at Kaakiyow Li Moond Likel (a Michif name meaning All Peoples' School), which is an adult learning centre offering the mature grade twelve diploma, which we started in September 2007. The ceremony took place in Turtle Island Community Centre, in the heart of LSP, where classes are held. A twenty-four-year-old Aboriginal woman, who had graduated the year before and had just completed her first year of post-secondary education at Red River College, spoke to those of us assembled for the celebration. She described dropping out of school in grade ten because of alcohol and drug addiction and related problems, and said that she had come back to Kaakiyow two years ago to give education another try in a more community-like setting. Mearle Chief, one of the two outstanding teachers at Kaakiyow (Christa Fuerst is the other; Candi Beardy is the equally outstanding and absolutely necessary support/outreach worker), told me after the ceremony that when this young woman first came to Kaakiyow she was completely unable to speak in class, so lacking was she in self-confidence and self-esteem. Yet she spoke at the graduation ceremony with grace and poise and told us all about how Kaakiyow had transformed her life. James Cook, one of the 2010 graduates and a (young) grandfather, wrote in the Kaakiyow yearbook that he used to be shy and "felt useless" following years of "living off" cheap jobs and partying every other

night,” but: “That was 10 years ago/Today I live my life different/Instead of drinking/I love to read/Learning new things everyday/Awesome..../My next goal is to become a Social Worker.” A long-time resident of LSP told me following the ceremony that her daughter, who also graduated that day, had been deeply depressed and virtually unable to leave their home before starting at Kaakiyow three years before. Now she is a grade twelve graduate planning a career as a childcare worker, and we hope to hire her — consistent with our local hiring strategy — in the childcare/family resource centre, which is another of our projects (because residents have told us that this is what they need). The centre is scheduled to open in September 2011, creating twenty-four local jobs and increased opportunities for parents to earn their grade twelve.

When the provincial minister for Housing and Community Development visited Lord Selkirk Park and Kaakiyow at our invitation in early February 2010, every student in attendance stood, one after the other and without prompting, to tell her that they had experienced a great many problems associated with poverty and racism and the very damaging effects of colonization, and at times they felt hopeless about their futures, but that Kaakiyow was transforming their lives.

Many lives are being transformed at Lord Selkirk Park Housing Developments; the community too is being transformed. Opportunities, tailored to the particular circumstances of residents of LSP, are being created for people to develop their individual capacities and their community in ways of their and their community’s choosing. Many are seizing these opportunities. The mood in the Developments (as LSP is called by those in the North End) is becoming noticeably more positive, and residents are gradually stepping forward to say that they too want to be involved with the many good things going on there.

Poverty and Public Housing

This book is about urban poverty and large, inner-city public housing projects. The two usually go together — but they need not. Public housing projects can be good places to live, the negative image notwithstanding. Poverty is solved not by razing public housing projects, as has been the practice throughout North America during the past two decades, but rather by rebuilding public housing communities from within.

Public housing and its residents are stigmatized and stereotyped in ways that obscure more than they reveal and that feed into a long-standing theme in the study of urban poverty that places the blame for their often-difficult circumstances on public housing residents themselves, identifying their behaviour and their cultural attributes as the primary sources of their poverty. The design of large urban public housing projects has also become a popular

part of the explanation for public housing woes. While design is an issue and while public housing projects are home to more than their share of destructive and illegal behaviour, the problems typically associated with inner-city public housing are better explained by a combination of socio-economic and historical factors. These include the hollowing out of inner cities due to post-Second World War suburbanization; the de-industrialization associated with an increasingly globalized economy, which has created a labour market particularly disadvantageous to low-income people; the inability of the private, for-profit housing industry to meet Canada's long-standing need for low-income rental housing; the absence of a national housing strategy; the continued power of racism, and in the case of Aboriginal people, of colonization; and the failure of governments, consistent with the neoliberalism of the past thirty years, to invest in a meaningful anti-poverty strategy, and more generally their failure to invest in initiatives that promote equality, rather than ever-increasing inequality. In some cases, Toronto's Regent Park for example, the neoliberal failure to invest has led to the physical deterioration of valuable public housing. In many cases, neoliberal ideas about the redevelopment of deteriorated downtowns have placed nearby public housing projects at risk because higher-income people want the increasingly valuable land on which the public housing and its low-income residents are located.

Four Public Housing Projects

In this book I examine four inner-city public housing projects: Little Mountain Housing in Vancouver; Regent Park in Toronto; Uniacke Square in Halifax; and Lord Selkirk Park in Winnipeg.

Little Mountain was bulldozed in 2009 and 2010. The residents, who insist that Little Mountain was a wonderful place to live and to raise a family, have been scattered. The beautiful location on which it was built lies vacant, while tens of thousands in Vancouver are in need of good quality, low-income rental housing of the kind that Little Mountain provided. Yet the case of Little Mountain is important because it provides empirical evidence that public housing can be a good place to live.

Regent Park in Toronto is in the midst of a massive, fifteen-year or longer redevelopment that will see each of its 2083 units of subsidized housing bulldozed and the location revamped as a mixed-income community, which will, upon completion, have cost a currently estimated \$1 billion. Despite this massive cost, the redevelopment will produce no net gain whatever in the number of subsidized housing units, and in fact there will be a net loss of such units on the Regent Park footprint, at a time when there are long wait lists for subsidized housing in Toronto. The redevelopment will displace many long-term residents who consider Regent Park to be home, who feel a strong sense of community in Regent Park and who want to stay. The area,

a twenty-minute walk from the Eaton Centre in downtown Toronto, will look better and will offer an attractive downtown location for those who can afford the new condos, but many low-income people will have been moved out.

Uniacke Square is located in a gradually gentrifying North End neighbourhood located a ten-minute walk from downtown Halifax. It faces the risk that its fate, and that of its low-income residents, will be similar to that of the residents of Little Mountain and Regent Park. The land on which Uniacke Square sits may soon become valuable, and that typically means trouble for low-income residents. Any attempt to privatize the public housing units, an idea frequently floated in recent years, which some consider a solution to the problems associated with Uniacke Square, is likely to face concerted opposition from residents. They say that theirs is a tightly knit community in which everyone knows everyone else and where, despite the stigma and stereotypes, they want to stay.

In Winnipeg's Lord Selkirk Park, a different approach is underway. Sheltered from the threat of the bulldozer and of redevelopment in the interests of higher-income people by its location in Winnipeg's very low-income North End, far from a downtown that has been largely unsuccessful in its revitalization efforts to date, it is in the early stages of the Rebuilding from Within strategy, which holds out significant promise for its low-income residents and may yield insight into anti-poverty efforts elsewhere.

To varying degrees, the four public housing projects examined in this book exhibit all of the characteristics of spatially concentrated racialized poverty. As shown in Table 1-1, labour force participation rates, levels of formal education and median incomes are low in each project, while rates of unemployment, proportions of single-parent families and the incidence of poverty, as measured by incomes below the Statistics Canada Low-Income Cut Offs (LICOs) are high. Census Canada data for 2006 show that in Uniacke Square in Halifax, just under half of the residents are of African-Canadian descent; in Winnipeg's Lord Selkirk Park, about two-thirds of residents are Aboriginal; in Regent Park, some eighty-five different languages are spoken; and in Little Mountain, two-thirds of residents were of African or Asian descent.

These high levels of racialized poverty notwithstanding, the process underway at LSP and the long-term success of Vancouver's Little Mountain Housing are evidence that — contrary to popular opinion and contrary to the stigma and stereotypes that fuel that opinion — inner-city public housing projects can be good places to live. Each of the four cases provides evidence of a strong sense of community. That so many large, inner-city public housing projects have been bulldozed is a function less of the flaws of public housing and more of the desirability of the land to those of higher incomes, plus the

Table 1-1 Selected Indicators, Four Public Housing Projects, 2006

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Little Mountain</i>	<i>Lord Selkirk Park</i>	<i>Regent Park</i>	<i>Uniacke Square</i>
Single-parent families	46.4%	60.5%	42.8%	64.1%
Less than high school (20+)	32.8%	58.7%	42.8%	24.0%
Adult unemployment rate (25+)	11.6%	18.7%	19.7%	15.3%
Adult labour force participation (25+)	71.7%	39.5%	49.7%	68.6%
Female labour force participation (25+)	74.3%	28.2%	40.4%	64.2%
Youth labour force participation (15–24)	84.2%	37.7%	49.3%	55.5%
Median household income	\$37,010	\$15,552	\$29,511	\$28,000
% below LICO	35.7%	82.8%	67.9%	64.0%

Source: Statistics Canada, Census of Canada

willingness of neoliberal governments to displace the poor in the interests of the more well-to-do. This displacement is made the more poignant by the severe shortage across the country of low-income rental housing. The alternative to the bulldozer is the long, slow, grassroots process of community development being undertaken at Lord Selkirk Park.

There are limits to this grassroots approach, but it is the necessary but not sufficient condition for the transformation of public housing in ways of residents' choosing. The limits have to do with the failure of neoliberal governments to use the all-important tool of public investment to the extent that is necessary to solve the complex problems of spatially concentrated racialized poverty. Building on the strengths of low-income public housing projects — the strong sense of community, the good quality of the rental housing in those cases when it has not been deliberately allowed to physically deteriorate, the many strong and healthy individuals and families who live there, for example — is the conceptual and practical starting point. But the process will be stalled at an early stage in the absence of meaningful public investment in those institutions — resource centres, adult education facilities, childcare centres, for example — that residents identify as being what they need to transform their lives and their communities in ways of their choosing. Public investment on the scale that is necessary, however, is directly counter to the ideological temper of the times, which leads governments to disinvest rather than to invest at the lower end of the income scale.

What this book shows is that large, inner-city public housing projects

have many more strengths than most people think and that, rather than being torn down in the interests of higher-income people when low-income rental housing is already in short supply, they should and can be rebuilt from within, using an asset-based and resident-driven form of community development supported by meaningful public investment. We all, poor people especially, need good places to live — places where we can live in safety and dignity, and where we have the opportunities and supports needed to build healthy lives and communities. Public housing can meet that need.

Appendix: Methodology

In addition to examining historical and contemporary documentary records, and the rich body of work on urban issues and especially urban neoliberalism, I have relied heavily on interview data — particularly open-ended interviews to learn what respondents themselves considered to be significant — for Little Mountain, Regent Park and Uniacke Square, and interview data plus participant observation for Winnipeg’s Lord Selkirk Park. The University of Winnipeg Senate Ethics Committee approved all interviews.

I became involved in the attempt to understand public housing and the poverty typically associated with public housing in 2005, when Nanette McKay, then executive director of the North End Community Renewal Corporation (NECRC), invited me, because of my involvement in Winnipeg inner-city issues, to write a history of Lord Selkirk Park. LSP, built in Winnipeg’s North End in 1967 as part of urban renewal, has been plagued for years by the kinds of problems typically associated in the public imagination with spatially concentrated racialized poverty. I wrote a history of LSP for NECRC and have remained actively involved since then, working closely (in a voluntary capacity) with a variety of community workers and residents on the Rebuilding from Within strategy. I have written about parts of this process in three separate editions of Winnipeg’s annual *State of the Inner City Report* (CCPA-Mb 2009, 2007, 2005) and in a paper on Aboriginal women in LSP (Silver 2009a), and have contributed to the writing of many internal documents associated with our efforts. In addition to my participant observation, I have been involved in commissioning interviews of various kinds with LSP residents over these years; in every case the interviewing has been done either by residents or by Aboriginal people who have previously lived in or near LSP. These interviewers were Candi Beardy, Elizabeth Bingus, Pam Hotomani, Claudette Michell, Jennifer Seaton and Jake Wark, with the support and assistance of Diane Barron, Janice Goodman, Cheyenne Henry and Carolyn Young.

Early in the process of attempting to understand the case of LSP, I visited Toronto’s Regent Park, Canada’s oldest, largest and arguably most famous and most studied public housing project. This was the first of five research

trips to Regent Park, during the first three of which I interviewed a wide range of community workers and public officials directly involved in Regent Park's massive redevelopment. During my last two trips, in 2009 and 2010, I conducted relatively short interviews with seventy residents — women and men, younger and older, representing many of the ethnic groups now living in Regent Park — aimed at gaining an understanding of their responses to and evaluations of the redevelopment process.

In 2006, I was invited to be a guest speaker at a conference organized by the Uniacke Square Tenants' Association in North End Halifax. I met many knowledgeable people, including residents, community workers and public officials, and decided to include Uniacke Square in a comparative study of Canadian public housing projects. I made three subsequent research trips to Halifax. During my last trip, in May 2010, I hired Donna Nelligan, a long-time resident, parent and activist in that public housing project with whom I had spoken on each previous trip, to conduct in-depth interviews with ten residents of "the Square," including women and men, younger and older, African-Canadian and not African-Canadian.

Meanwhile, Matthew Rogers, my research assistant on aspects of each of Lord Selkirk Park, Regent Park and Uniacke Square, graduated from the University of Winnipeg and left for Vancouver to do a master's degree in community and regional planning at UBC. He suggested that I include Vancouver's Little Mountain Housing in my comparative study. Matt wrote his master's thesis on Little Mountain and continued work as my research assistant, conducting twenty in-depth interviews, ten of which were with current and former Little Mountain residents, and ten with public officials and community activists living in a neighbourhood adjoining Little Mountain. I made one research trip to Little Mountain, in April 2010, and interviewed a number of the public officials and residents that Matt had interviewed.