A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN:
EXPLORING "HIDDEN POVERTY" AND ROOMING HOUSING IN THE VILLAGE NEIGHBOURHOOD AT YORK UNIVERSITY

"Your immediate problem is not so much the right of the soul to expand, but the necessity for everybody to have a decent dwelling; not to make all homes mansions, but to ensure that none of them will be hovels. It is only a very rare soul that can expand in a hovel. This objective of decent housing simply has to be achieved in our democratic society."

– Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson
Speech to the Ontario Association of Housing Authorities, 1965

"All residents should have a safe, secure, affordable and well-maintained home from which to realize their full potential."
– Toronto Housing Charter

ABSTRACT

This paper is a qualitative case study on "hidden poverty" that examines the experiences of those living in rooming housing in the Village neighbourhood at York University. By conducting interviews with three tenants of varying tenures with rooming housing, this study shines light on a substantial, but underreported demographic in Toronto: those who escape traditional census data collection, but who would still fall under the category of living below the poverty line. In addition, this paper explains the creation of rooming housing as a "natural" market-led response to growing demand for affordable housing that is only made possible by the divesting of housing market externalities (shared economies of scale).

Based on the data from the three interviews, this study finds that rooming housing is often precarious, overcrowded, undermaintained, and rife with conflict (either between tenants, or between tenant and landlord). These factors have a significant impact on the interviewees' sense of home within rooming housing. Thus, the notion of "home" is a result of the interplay between sense of place, social relations and the physical environment.

Ultimately, the paper concludes that rooming housing is an already existing pillar of Toronto's affordable housing makeup, and the city would do well to acknowledge its growing prominence and enact regulations to protect and enforce the rights of tenants.

GUIDING RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What are the lived experiences of the people who live in rooming houses?
- How are (shared) spaces socially constructed, and thusly, contested?
- What are the spatial and social dilemmas that emerge from living in such close quarters?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Affordable housing: rhetoric vs. reality

Toronto's stance on rooming housing is hazy, at best. Due to amalgamation, the City of Toronto has a patchwork of policies that both allow *and* ban rooming housing. In Etobicoke and the old city of Toronto, rooming houses are legally allowed, but are regulated and must be licensed. In North York, Scarborough, and York, rooming houses are illegal. Their legality, however, has not prevented rooming houses from popping up in these areas. The Village at York is one such example.

The economics of housing markets: How are rooming houses made affordable?

The inexpensiveness of rooming housing can be attributed to what Henderson refers to as "housing market externalities" of which there are two types: social and neighbourhood quality.[1] Social externalities have a profound impact on a tenant's satisfaction with their dwelling, and represent the behaviours and characteristics of their neighbours, including: how noisy they are, what age they are, whether they are friendly and welcoming, what religion they practice (if any), and even what race or ethnicity they are.[2] In turn, the "behaviour and characteristics of one's neighbours" is reflected in the lower rents in multi-unit housing.[3]

While location and proximity to amenities are integral to the determining of market rent, implicit in the calculation are the services included to maintain a standard of living. For instance, Miceli et al. state that:

"When a person rents an apartment in the private rental market, part of the rent implicitly pays for management services aimed at minimizing negative inter-tenant externalities. These services include screening of prospective tenants, monitoring of tenant behavior and eviction of undesirable tenants, maintenance of the physical structure, including common areas, and the like. [...] Low income households, however, may be forced to consume housing with little or no management services, even if they value those services, because they cannot afford the dollar cost."[4]

Furthermore, multi-unit rental dwellings are especially prone to these externalities, not because of an innate difference between renters and owners, but because of the (extremely) close proximity between units.[5] Due to such close living quarters, "the undesirable characteristics of one's neighbors, (e.g. how noisy or sloppy they are), [become] more noticeable."[6] With rooming housing, housing externalities are "especially strong" because of the shared common spaces between tenants, which are then categorized as public goods.[7] When seen in such a light, a "free-rider problem" emerges where "common areas, like individual units, will generally [become] overused and undermaintained."[8] The relatively low rents also tend to attract a transient clientele, adding to a house's instability and waywardness.

OVERVIEW OF THE VILLAGE

At just over 12 years old, the Village neighbourhood is a fairly new residential community. Developed by Tribute Communities, roughly 130 acres of land was purchased from York to build some 845 homes. The neighbourhood is located directly south of the school's property lines.

Physically, the Village is comprised of detached houses, semi-detached townhouses and condominium-style homes intended for single-family occupancies. Adhering to strict urban design principles, the built form draws on the "new urbanist" design model that seeks to promote walkable neighbourhoods centred on "traditional neighbourhood design" and environmentally-sound "transit oriented development."[8] As a result, houses are densely packed and driveways are "hidden" and shared amongst neighbours. In turn, the Village represent a converging of conflicting values: the surburban ideal of maximum private space and the urban principle of density. Nevertheless, a predominant share of the homes in the Village have been bought and repurposed into student rooming houses, transforming traditional two to three bedroom houses into dwellings with upwards of sixteen units.[9] Most of these rooming houses in the Village are conjointly held by a concentrated network of owners.[10]

FIGURE 1 – A standard rooming house in the Village neighbourhood at York University.

FIGURE 2 – A Google Maps image of the Village neighbourhood.

FIGURE 3 – A Google Maps overview image of the Village neighbourhood.

FIGURE 4 – A landlord's attempt to manage overcrowding.

NO VISITORS AFTER 11, IF AN EXCEPTION IS REQUIRED, CALL LANDLORDS IMMDEIATELY FOR PERMISSION.

FIGURE 5 – A picture depicting an example of a shared kitchen that is overused and undermaintained. Seen as a public good with no designated responsibilities, garbage piles up.

METHODOLOGY & APPROACHES

- Qualitative case study grounded in ethnographic research (participant observation, personal experiences, etc.)
- Three semi-structured interviews with key informants
  - Participants found via convenience sampling
  - All participants described themselves as working class or low-income.
- Each interview lasted at least 40 minutes. A list of questions were given, but participants were encouraged to speak freely on any matter regarding their living situation.

Theoretical framework: Social constructivist – Meaning is constructed from experience. This study intends to grasp the subjective meanings of the participants' lives, and to ground them with theory, in what Donna Haraway refers to as situated knowledge.[11]

Theoretical approaches: Critical urban theory & Marxist theory

Social production of space – "We do not live, act and work 'in' space so much as by living, acting and working we produce space."[12]

Social-spatial dialectic – "The phenomenon where the spatial shapes the social, and vice versa."[13] This theory is used to articulate the tensions had within rooming housing. The social interactions between tenant and tenant, and the relations between tenant and landlord ultimately shape spatiality and the notions of home, and of public space and private space.

Politics of space – In the capitalist system, social space is hierarchical and allocated according to class. This class structure is reinforced and reproduced by social planning. When space is commodified, and made scarce, with "an abundance of space for the rich and too little for the poor, or because of uneven development in the quality of places, or indeed both" then space becomes a political product whereby people occupy and exert their power over it.[14]

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

1. Rooming housing tenancies are highly precarious and transient, and there is no stringent screening process for new tenants beyond their ability to pay rent. Not having a say in who you live with and a revolving door of tenancies has brought about a deep feeling of seclusion and alienation among the residents in their own home.

2. Due to overcrowding, shared common spaces are highly contentious and often contested. All the interviewees spoke at length about how the kitchen and bathrooms are inadequate for the amount of people living there. These confined and shared common spaces are effectively being contested every day. One tenant, Wesley, mentioned using the kitchen in a previous rooming house in the Village, only to be openly intimidated and forced out by a housemate, referring to the interaction as "the new way of bullying." At the current rooming house, Wesley complains of a housemate "taking three hours [to cook]. She thinks she owns the place." Moreover, when he tried to share the kitchen one day, the same tenant "stood there staring" at Wesley with intimidation, as though he had no right to the space. Another participant, Bear, stated that she only cooked "simple meals" in a conscious effort to not monopolize the kitchen. In her interview, she declares "sharing a kitchen is okay since the cooking I do is simple, so as to not take up too much kitchen space or kitchen time."

Bathrooms, prevailingly seen as private spaces, are also quite contentious. Hygiene and upkeep appears to be a matter of great concern for the tenants. From remembering to flush, to even considering the need for others to use the bathroom, the interviewees expressed displeasure with having to share bathrooms with people who are essentially strangers. As such, tenants do not feel comfortable leaving their toiletries in the washrooms.

3. Shared common spaces are relegated to being "public goods," removing all personal responsibility for household chores like cleaning and throwing out the trash. As Trixie writes, "one thing I don't like sharing space is because some people, they don't care."

4. With shared living quarters the line between private space and public space becomes blurred. In shared living arrangements like rooming houses, kitchens and bathrooms are transformed into public or pseudo-private spaces. Their overuse and lack of consistent upkeep reinforces this theoretical transformation of private into public. When a tenant leaves their dirty dishes out and takes up space in the sink, or spends an inordinate amount of time cooking, or when a tenant doesn't clean up after themselves in the bathroom, residents are forced to reconcile the idea of doing private activities in "public" spaces.

"[Living here] is a roller coaster." – Trixie

"This is not my home." – Wesley

"He dominated me and my space." – Wesley

"The landlord does not respect us." – Bear