

Research for communities

VOICING

Housing Experiences in Inner City Winnipeg

Too often social policy decisions are made by people with little or no direct experience of the conditions that they are trying to address. The voices of the poor and the poorly housed, in particular, are rarely heard by decision makers.

Conversations about this issue between the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba and the Social Justice Committee of Klinik Community Health Centre provided the spark for what became *The Voicing Housing Experiences in Inner City Winnipeg* project.

The idea was to ask a small number of low-income inner-city residents and individuals living in inner-city-like situations to describe their rental-housing issues. The participants lived in residential or mixed-use areas with an insufficient supply of rental units, much of which is deteriorating.

Voicing Housing Experiences, which was written by Jil Brody, Devon Arthurson, and Benita Kleiwer tells of the daily struggles faced by the 18 individuals who participated in the research project. The Klinik Committee was instrumental in conducting

this project and the researchers extend their gratitude to them for their support and insights.

The report was published as part of the CCPA-Manitoba's 2008 *State of the Inner City Report*, which is available from the CCPA. The photographs accompanying this report were taken by project participants, the names used in the articles have been changed to protect their privacy.

It is not merely a lack of income or money that keeps many people stuck in unsafe and inadequate housing conditions. A lack

Allowing tenants to beautify the neighbourhood contributes both to Tracie's well being and to that of the community. Photographer: Tracie.



of decent and affordable rental units is a conjoined and equally major issue. There are also a number of other connected factors over which participants feel no control, including poor landlord relations, policy restraints, and community disorganization. These only complicate and strengthen the connections between low-income, sub-standard rental units, and a lack of rental-housing stock.

The rest of this article excerpts some of their stories, illustrating them with photographs that they took to show what they like and dislike about their homes.

VIREAK'S VOICE

I was trained to fight in the war for a while in Cambodia. I fought in the war when I was six [years old] for about seven years. I fought in the jungle...I came here [when I was 13] and I see a lot of difference. I see people different, you know...I see all different ways...Well, most important [for people is] to have to not feel unsafe when they are living in their home. Because a lot of people they feel unsafe. They think they're safe but in their minds they feel something disturbing. But as for me, I like to help that kind of people because where I come from I don't have what I got compared to what I have now. I don't have nothing [then]."

Vireak now lives in a rooming house and voluntarily takes care of and protects residents whom he describes as vulnerable because of diminished mental capacity or mental illness. Vireak cannot remember how many places he has lived in the past three

years: "I have a lot of friends," he laughs after being prompted with "Six? Twelve?"

LOOKING FOR THE GOOD STUFF

Without exception, each participant named at least one thing about their current housing situation that they like or find adequate. There was one common response to the question, "What do you like about your current housing arrangement?" Folks enjoy living in close proximity or within walking distance to family and friends, laundry facilities, bus routes, grocery stores, schools, places of worship, community centres and recreation facilities, parks, health services, service agencies, and similar destinations. Despite the fact that participants have at least some apprehension about living in dangerous and violent communities, many participants are actively involved in their communities and in various volunteer activities. For the most part, participants feel quite attached and partial to their neighbourhoods. A majority of participants could also say that where they lived now was an improvement, however marginal, over previous housing arrangements.

Abigail and Felicity, both living in supported environments, were for the most part positive about their housing situations. Abigail, at one time homeless and now living in a group home, is grateful for the three meals a day that are included in her rent, although she bristled at all of the house rules. She said, "I like how I'm fed. You know, after being homeless for a while, being fed is good... There was times where I went quite a while without eating, so it's good that I'm fed." Felicity, who agreed that

rules can be stifling, felt that the supportive staffing and program resources at the transition house were critical to her healing journey. She said, “We’re getting practical experience in how to transition back into society.”

TRACIE’S VOICE

I can’t sit here [in Spirit Park] without people stopping to chat. That’s why I wanted you [the interviewer] to sit out here because then you could see how many people walk by...[Once people see this garden, then]...people start sprucing their houses up. [They say, ‘We’ve] got a gorgeous park down the street.’ And they’re renovating there. [Tracie points to houses around Spirit Park.] This guy just finished renovating, putting in a new backyard with a garden. [Spirit Park] is a nice little pocket, an oasis in an area where people had really underestimated [the value], just because it was inner city. And I even heard a little hearsay, ‘Well, it’s inner city, it’s core area. Why put money into it?’ They [governments] don’t care. [But Spirit Park has] changed the neighbourhood so much. That’s what I mean by community. When you can sit out here and it takes you half an hour or more to catch the bus, you miss the bus, too, because you’re too busy talking.

Tracie is a gardener at Spirit Park community garden on Young Street in the West Broadway neighbourhood, which is where she was interviewed. The Park is funded by the City of Winnipeg and Neighbourhood’s Alive!, an initiative of the

provincial government, and co-ordinated by the West Broadway Development Corporation. Being mid-summer, one could see and smell the fruits of her and other community members’ labours. People of all ages strolled through the garden, walked down the sidewalk, or bicycled down the street. Almost everyone stopped to chat with her; everyone said hello and smiled. One can almost feel Tracie’s connection to the ground she tends. She points out which vegetables and flowers grow best in the soil conditions in Spirit Park and which trees have been mis-planted. She knows how to winter garden. She is proud of what her neighbourhood has created in Spirit Park. There are no fences and yet the garden has not been raided or defaced in any way. The mosaic sculpture that sits in the park is missing only an occasional tile, probably victim to the foot of a child who played on its round, scratchy-smooth surface. While she is being interviewed, several youths from Resource Assistance for Youth (RaY, a local organization committed to working with at-risk and homeless youth) haul in buckets

This picture illustrates both a like and a dislike of one of the participants. The shelf above the stove provides a handy storage space for smaller pans and pots. But, the stove/oven itself is useless. The oven dial is turned to the ‘on’ position but the oven is not on. The fuse box is open to illustrate that the ancient wiring blows a fuse every time the oven is turned on. Photographer: Doug



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of water to feed their beds. Tracie points out the two “Help Yourself” community plots. Tracie’s story and the Spirit Park example illustrate how adequate and safe housing can contribute to the well-being of inner-city neighbourhoods and residents. They also show how resources that fund such spaces can contribute to the betterment of the housing stock itself.

MEETING NEEDS

The housing needs identified by the 18 participants are not extreme, nor are they unreasonable or unachievable.

First, people are not just interested in having good housing but in being part of a community to which they can contribute. This speaks to mutuality and respect and resourcefulness verses charity and dependence. The story about Spirit Park -a community garden - is a powerful example of this.

Secondly, it is difficult to have good mental and physical health if you don’t have safe and comfortable surroundings.

Thirdly, good housing will happen when all levels of government, agencies, business people, landlords and community people work together.

And lastly, a spectrum of housing is needed including supportive, transitional, through to independent or, even better, interdependent housing.



This Manitoba Housing unit offers a downtown Winnipeg vista that is worth seeing year-round: even in winter, the view is beautiful. Photographer: Haley