

Challenges of Public Housing in the 1990s: The Case of Ontario, Canada

Nancy Smith
Ontario Housing Corporation

Abstract

Public housing makes up almost one-third of Canada's social housing stock. As Canada's earliest form of social housing, public housing is confronted with a great number of management challenges. Using the Ontario Housing Corporation as a case study, the article reviews the challenges confronting public housing and how housing management practices have changed in response. These challenges include a general residualization of tenants, the aging in place of seniors (who occupy nearly half the stock), and the physical deterioration or functional obsolescence of a significant share of that stock.

The conclusions argue for reform of management that focuses on the modernization of management systems and the development of more appropriate organizational structures that can more readily adapt.

Keywords: Low-income housing; Management; Canada

Introduction

The management of social housing is complex, extending beyond the traditional tasks of property management to the improvement of the social environment. This article focuses on the older and more challenging public housing part of the social housing stock in Canada. It presents this review in the form of a case study of the Ontario Housing Corporation (OHC), the agency responsible for the largest portfolio of public housing in Canada.

The article is structured to provide a brief overview of the Canadian context of social housing and, more specifically, public housing. It locates OHC in this context and outlines the trends and associated challenges that have influenced housing management in Canada. Finally, the article illustrates how OHC has responded to these challenges through tenant-based initiatives, project redevelopment, and organizational adaptation.

History and context of public housing in Canada

Today, the term “social housing” is used to refer to the entire stock of government-assisted housing—some 650,000 units in Canada, or 6.5 percent of the total housing stock. The private rental sector makes up 28 percent and owner-occupied housing 64 percent of the total stock. This is similar to the distribution of housing stock in the United States. In the U.K., however, the distribution of the rental housing stock is the inverse of that in Canada, with a private rental sector much smaller than the public, nonprofit sector (Perry 1995).

The overall stock of social housing in Canada has been developed since 1949 through a variety of different housing programs, predominantly supply programs that are augmented by some small rent supplement and shelter allowance programs. Supply programs initially involved direct provision and ownership by government agencies and were thus termed public housing. Public housing makes up about one-third (205,000 units) of all social housing in Canada. Most public housing was developed prior to the 1980s. Beginning in 1973, nonprofit housing, typically involving smaller projects owned and operated by community groups and municipal nonprofit corporations, emerged as the principal supplier of social housing—ultimately accounting for some 350,000 units.¹ The remaining 100,000 units are private sector units, specifically targeted to lower income households either through rent supplements or as a result of specific operating agreements with project owners as part of development or rehabilitation loans.

Canada’s constitution is ambiguous about whether responsibility for housing lies with the provinces or with the federal government. However, in the early postwar period, federal desire for large-scale housing production as a mechanism for employment generation together with federal government spending powers created a strong federal presence and influence over housing policy in Canada. The provinces have participated in the development of policies and programs to varying degrees; Ontario, Canada’s largest province, has been the most active—in part because of housing pressures in a rapidly growing Toronto in the early 1960s and the related urging of municipal officials. With new federal legislation in 1964, Ontario was the first province to establish enabling legislation and a housing agency, OHC, to take advantage of the new provisions of the National Housing

¹ Dreier and Hulchanski (1993) provide a detailed discussion of the post-1973 evolution of the nonprofit sector in Canada.

Act (NHA) that provided for 90 percent loans and a contribution of 50 percent of the operating losses of a subsidized housing project owned by a provincial, municipal, or public housing agency (Rose 1980).

During the late 1960s, all the remaining provinces also established housing corporations as the principal conduit through which to develop and administer their public housing portfolios. In most provinces, the day-to-day management of public housing is further decentralized to local public housing authorities, typically with boards composed of municipal elected officials or other community members. In some cases—for example, British Columbia and Quebec—the housing corporation is responsible for nonprofit units as well as public housing. In Ontario, however, this is not the case: The social housing portfolio is split, and the ongoing nonprofit housing program is the responsibility of the Ministry of Housing. OHC is responsible only for public housing.

During the production phase (1949 to 1984), public housing evolved from an initial emphasis on family housing to a later emphasis on housing for seniors: Three-quarters of the units built before 1970 were family oriented; 57 percent of those built after 1969 were for seniors. Overall, almost half the portfolio is seniors' units, 44 percent is family units, and 7 percent is in mixed family and senior buildings. All units in public housing are targeted to low-income households, and rents are based on a percentage of income.

Apart from the evolution in unit type, there have been other shifts in the client base. As Murdie (1994b) has noted—and in a trend similar to trends in the U.K. and the United States—the tenant profile in public housing has become increasingly residualized. In 1970, 20 percent of tenants were elderly; in 1989, 26 percent were elderly, compared with about 11 percent in the general population. In 1970, 57 percent of tenants reported employment earnings as their main source of income, compared with only 18 percent in 1989. Also, in 1989, public housing tenants had more lone-parent families (24 percent) than renters in general (10 percent) and had incomes only 40 percent of average renter incomes [Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) 1990].

Among Canada's provinces, Ontario is the largest provider of public housing. While Ontario contains 37 percent of all households in Canada, it has 55 percent of all Canada's public housing units. Quebec contains about 20 percent of the country's public

housing units, Alberta 9 percent, and Manitoba 7 percent. None of the other seven provinces accounts for more than 2 percent of the public housing units in Canada (CMHC 1992).

As the earliest form of publicly assisted housing in Canada, the public housing stock is now the oldest and in the greatest need of repair and updating. Moreover, because of Ontario's more active and earlier efforts, more of the older stock is in Ontario. Almost three-quarters of the public housing in Ontario was built before 1974, compared with 55 percent in Canada on average (CMHC 1990). In addition, a range of factors including aging, increasing welfare dependence, and immigration have underpinned an evolution in the profile of the tenants living in this housing. Together, these factors have contributed to a significant management challenge for OHC.

As the provincial corporation created in 1964 expressly to develop and operate what would become this very large public housing portfolio, OHC provides a useful example of the issues and management responses that will soon pervade the social housing stock in Canada.

Ontario Housing Corporation

Like other provincial housing corporations established during the 1960s, OHC has two purposes: to bring together a disparate collection of publicly funded housing and to provide an orderly vehicle for cost sharing between the provinces and the federal government. This cost sharing was both for ongoing operating costs, including maintenance, and for construction of new units. Also, provincial legislation provided for planning for urban renewal or development, housing rehabilitation, acquisition loans, and housing studies. The legislation establishing OHC gives the corporation extensive powers to raise its own funds through loans or by issuing debentures, bills, or notes to be guaranteed by the Ontario government. Newfoundland was the only other province to provide for guarantees in the legislation establishing its housing corporation (Rose 1980).

The OHC portfolio reflects the two aims of its establishment. About 5 percent of the units date from the late 1940s through 1963 and were brought into the portfolio when OHC was established. About 45 percent of the units date from 1964 to 1971 and are predominantly high-rise family buildings. The remaining 50 percent of the units date from 1972 to 1984. These are

predominantly seniors' buildings, plus a small number of low-rise family units spread throughout the province.

With the 1973 establishment of the nonprofit model as a parallel vehicle for procuring assisted housing, the public housing program was gradually phased out and by 1984 had ceased new development. By 1992, the number of units in the nonprofit and co-op program was roughly equal to the number in the OHC portfolio. For OHC, this meant that after 20 years as a leader and major supplier of new units, its role had been taken over by the nonprofit programs. Today, 84,400 units of public housing are owned by OHC, and it is also responsible for another 16,700 rent supplement units within private rental buildings.

The nonprofit and cooperative program continued to produce new units and forms much of the backdrop for management of public housing in Canada.² The nonprofit program was designed explicitly in reaction to, and to set itself apart from, public housing. The units are designed to be smaller in scale and lower in height. They attempt to fit into their communities. They are newer and reflect trends toward a built environment that respects the social community. They include a mixture of income groups and vary in the percentage of rent-geared-to-income units in any given project, from as low as 25 percent up to 100 percent in some smaller or special-needs-oriented developments.³

Within Ontario, the local housing authorities (LHAs) operate under a master agreement with OHC and are agents of OHC, but the organizational structure has a number of ambiguities. The LHAs run public housing on behalf of OHC. They are bound by OHC policy, established by its board of directors, and by government policy through the OHC board. Yet, the 56 LHAs that administer public housing on behalf of OHC are in a different category of agency from it. Central ministries of the provincial government often issue policy and direction to LHAs directly,

² It is notable that, unlike the situation in the U.K., the policy shift away from public housing in favor of nonprofit housing was not a function of the dynamic between the central and local authorities (Butler 1993; Pomeroy 1993). In Canada, municipalities continued to be very active, many having established specific nonprofit housing corporations. Despite their municipal ownership and management, these are not categorized as public housing.

³ While the design of the nonprofit program between 1973 and 1985 provided for a mix of incomes, federal policy shifted in 1986, requiring all tenants to be below specified income thresholds. Ontario was the only province to continue an approach of income mix, usually permitting 40 percent of units to be rented at market rents to households above the income thresholds.

ignoring LHA status as delivery agents for the larger corporation and undermining the relationship between OHC and the LHAs.

The situation is complicated further by other governance ambiguities. LHAs together employ 3,500 staff. OHC itself has no employees. It purchases services, ranging from financial services to human resources, policy and program development, and overall corporate management, from the provincial ministry of housing. Although all these services are key to corporate direction and planning, all the staff providing these services report to another employer. Even the chief executive officer of OHC is also an assistant deputy minister of the Ontario Ministry of Housing. Maintaining accountability and strategic direction in such circumstances is a major challenge.

OHC was established as a vehicle for federal-provincial cost sharing. The management demands placed on the organization and its parts, however, are now very different. Its activity has changed from development to management, its client base has evolved dramatically, its stock is aging, and years of being held up as the bad example have taken their toll in discouraging innovation, leadership, and risk taking among staff.

Long-term change and new challenges

Like many organizations, OHC is facing change from many directions, both external and internal, and the cumulative impact of these changes is now substantial. The potential client base is influenced by a range of social and economic factors, independent of any housing policy or program changes, including the increased labor force participation of women; a loss of manufacturing employment, particularly in Ontario; a shift to low-wage, part-time, and service-sector employment; a shift in immigration policy and an increase in total immigration; and policies of deinstitutionalization that release persons with disabilities into the community without community support systems (Murdie 1994b; Pomeroy 1995).

Meanwhile, changes in eligibility rules for assisted housing have had a dramatic impact on the residents in OHC units and on waiting lists. Substantially more tenants are lone parents and households dependent on government transfers. Senior residents are older and frailer than they were when the portfolio was established. Buildings have also aged or become socially obsolete. Legislative and policy requirements—ranging from whistleblowing to prevention of harassment—create administrative

requirements for OHC. The last five years have been characterized by increasing constraints, primarily on operating budgets. Conflict between the imposition of new requirements and the reduction in operating budgets is increasingly acute.

Eligibility changes

Public housing in Canada and, by and large, in Ontario began as housing for returning veterans and their families after World War II. Supply was short, rental and purchase prices were high, and the people to be housed were held in high public esteem. Originally, eligibility was rather narrowly defined: Families and seniors had access to public housing, although income restrictions and a rent mechanism that established rent as a percentage of income effectively targeted the units to lower-income households (Bacher 1993; Rose 1980; Wade 1986).

Beginning in the late 1970s, other specific groups were granted access. Physically disabled persons were accepted beginning in 1978, and developmentally disabled persons in 1981. Two formerly excluded groups were added in 1986: psychiatrically disabled persons and parents under the age of 18. In that same year, a special priority was established for women who were victims of assault; this has since been extended to include all victims of family violence. In 1988, public housing was defined as being open to all permanent legal residents of Canada living in Ontario, and in 1991, refugee claimants were added to the list. At the same time, there was a significant growth in households dependent on income assistance, particularly in Ontario, which increased demand for social housing. The point rating system used to determine eligibility and priority of access to social housing gives priority to households with the lowest income, although it also takes into account other factors such as household size and current housing circumstances. Thus, the point rating system has contributed to the residualization of the tenant profile.

Three separate studies document the increased diversity within particular OHC portfolios. For Metropolitan Toronto Housing Authority, Murdie (1994a) found that black households were more overrepresented in public housing than in the census metropolitan area (CMA) as a whole and that they were more overrepresented in 1986 than in 1971. During this period, the representation of blacks in public housing increased from 4.2 to 27 percent, while in the Toronto CMA it grew from 2.5 to 5 percent. Murdie attributes this distribution to a

combination of factors: the relative recency of black Caribbean migration to Toronto; the disproportionate number of black, female-headed, lone-parent families in Toronto; and cost, supply, and discriminatory constraints in the private rental market.

In the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton in May 1992, a survey was completed of the country of origin of the heads of household of the top 200 families on the list of applicants for public housing. Sixty-four percent were from outside Canada (Ottawa-Carleton Regional Housing Authority 1992a). The breakdown of applicants by unit size was particularly interesting. For two- and three-bedroom units, applicant heads of household were evenly split between Canadian and non-Canadian country of origin. However, for four-bedroom units 83 percent of the applicant heads of household were from outside Canada, and for five-bedroom units 100 percent of heads of households were. This likely reflects the difference in average family size between Canadian-origin and recent immigrant households in Ottawa-Carleton.

Data are also available from a separate survey of approximately 3,500 heads of resident households in 31 housing communities within the Ottawa-Carleton housing portfolio (Ottawa-Carleton Regional Housing Authority 1992b). In the total sample, about 70 percent were of Canadian origin and about 30 percent of non-Canadian origin. However, housing communities within the portfolio varied greatly: Half the communities had a greater percentage of heads of households from outside Canada than was the norm for all communities; seven communities had more than 40 percent of heads of households of non-Canadian origin; and one community had 50 percent. Large units are found in a limited number of housing communities in the portfolio. The results of this resident survey, taken with the results of the applicant survey, make it clear that family size is interacting with unit size to produce some acute concentrations of families of non-Canadian origin (Ottawa-Carleton Regional Housing Authority 1992a, 1992b).

Aging of senior residents

At a national level, a high proportion of residents in public housing are over 75 years old: 13 percent, compared with 4 percent in the population as a whole (table 1). In Ontario, about 12 percent of residents in public housing are 75 or older. Many of OHC's 60,000 elderly residents are long-term residents who have become elderly while living there, and it is estimated

Table 1. Distribution of Elderly Residents in Public Housing and in General Population, Canada (Percent)

Client Group	Age Group (Years)			
	55–64	65–74	75–84	85+
Seniors' public housing	12.3	38.5	34.2	9.9
Family-senior mixed public housing	6.8	10.8	7.3	0.6
All public housing	6.8	13.0	10.4	2.8
General population	9.2	6.5	3.2	0.9

Source: CMHC (1990).

Note: Public housing data from 1988 survey of residents; general population data from 1986 census.

that OHC houses 3.5 times the proportion of seniors over 80 as are in the population at large. Studies of individual housing authority populations and anecdotal reports also show a high incidence of frail elderly, many of them in isolated personal circumstances. For example, Ottawa-Carleton Regional Housing Authority found in a 1992 study of three seniors' buildings (580 units) that 20 percent of the residents were in need of immediate support to remain living in their homes. Half of respondents were 75 years of age or older, and a full third were 80 or older (Council on Aging 1992).

Of the OHC portfolio, 36,595 units, or 44 percent, are seniors' units. About 18,000 of these units are contained in two- or three-story walk-up buildings (Ontario Ministry of Housing 1993). Although individual housing authorities have initiated programs to place railings in halls and grab rails in baths and showers and to lower cupboards in kitchens, second-floor and third-floor access in walk-up buildings is a more difficult problem. Up to now, because of cost or other management considerations, it has been OHC policy not to install elevators in small walk-up buildings. Seniors in buildings without elevators will experience increasing difficulty in maintaining tenancy.

OHC took on this situation in the 1993–94 period. One approach is to do integrated upgrades, including elevators, hallway improvements such as railings, and within-unit improvements to kitchens and bathrooms. The OHC has initiated planning for some pilot projects to do this. Another approach under consideration, where the opportunity exists, is to transfer senior residents to more appropriate single-story or elevator-equipped nonprofit buildings in the community. The original walk-up building could then be converted to suit other applicants, such as singles, small families, or childless couples.

Challenges of the portfolio

In comparison with the stock in the U.K., public housing in Canada is not old. Much of the public housing stock was built more than 25 years ago, however, and often to minimal standards. Five percent of the OHC stock predates its 1964 inception, and about 45 percent of the OHC portfolio (38,250 units) was built between 1964 and 1971. These units were built by developers in response to OHC invitational advertisements and, generally, met only the minimum requirements of the National Building Code of the day. These units are predominantly high-rise family housing. The buildings are now 24 to 31 years old and have a rapidly increasing requirement for operating and maintenance funds.

The remaining half of the portfolio was built between 1971 and 1984 (42,017 units). These buildings were designed, constructed, and tendered with a more comprehensive performance specification that was updated and improved annually. As a result, they generally exceeded the prevailing minimum requirements of both the National Building Code and the Ontario Building Code. These units are largely seniors' units distributed throughout the province, plus a small number of low-rise family units.

A comprehensive evaluation of the entire public portfolio, based on NHA minimum standards, was undertaken by CMHC between 1987 and 1990. In this evaluation, 96.5 percent of projects were found to meet or exceed the NHA standards, although the incidence of failure to meet standards was higher for projects serving families as well as projects of mixed building form (including low- and high-rise), which tended to be larger, older projects in large urban centers (table 2). The CMHC evaluation also estimated the ongoing consequences of deferred maintenance and repair; this analysis indicated that an additional 55 projects every five years, or 7 percent of all public housing by 2003, would fail the NHA minimum standard (CMHC 1990).

In 1983 a major study of OHC housing was completed (Kline & Sears/Enviro-nics 1983). This study focused on long-term maintenance rather than minimum standards, and it found that low-rise units were generally well maintained and adequately funded for maintenance and repairs. On the other hand, the high-rise stock was found to be in deteriorating condition and inadequately funded for maintenance and repairs. By 1989, per-unit funding had caught up with the recommended level, but the accumulated shortfall from 1983 to 1989 was still of concern in a 1990 report (OHC 1990). Major shortfalls were estimated in

Table 2. Physical Condition of Public Housing, Canada, 1988

NHA Standard	Detached, Semidetached, and Row		Low-Rise (<4 Stories)		High-Rise		Mixed with No High-Rise		Mixed with High-Rise	
	Units	%	Units	%	Units	%	Units	%	Units	%
Fails	3,512	6.5	1,644	3.4	3,086	4.1	1,796	13.7	2,956	18.4
Meets	35,584	65.5	20,631	43.1	29,555	39.5	10,221	78.0	10,629	66.2
Exceeds	15,238	28.0	25,574	53.4	42,178	56.4	1,082	8.3	2,466	15.4
Total	54,334	100.0	47,849	100.0	74,819	100.0	13,099	100.0	16,051	100.0

Source: CMHC (1990).

Note: Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

building structure, including underground garages; in masonry, including rain screening, joint repair, and replacement; in elevator upgrading and replacement; and in site works.

The design of public housing has also been criticized (Dennis 1972; Sewell 1993). Jane Jacobs (1961) was one of the first to articulate the key role of the built environment in building or supporting social community. In her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jacobs takes issue with the tendency among design professionals and planning authorities to favor monolithic designs for housing the low-income population. Jacobs (1993) pointed out that these designs missed key things. Public space needs to be clearly set off from private space. People around a community during the day, such as seniors out walking, homebound mothers, and storekeepers, must be able to see what is going on so that they can keep an eye on things. And designers did not provide for mixed use or higher concentrations of people, both of which would lead to use of space during day and evening hours.

The key ideas are that what makes space livable is people and that people, in an effectively arranged environment, will keep an eye on things and take an interest. A well-designed environment sends a message to people that they are part of the management of the space. People will begin to act as natural proprietors. Mutual support is the key ingredient in livable communities and the key to appropriate community design.

Since Jacobs, others have developed these ideas further (e.g., Alexander, Ishikawa, and Silverstein 1977; Appleyard 1981; Cooper Marcus and Sarkissian 1986; Newman 1972). Findings from residents are consistent with these concepts. Residents want to see visitors coming, and they want to have a marker between their space and public space so that it is clear when someone has crossed the line. They want to be able to recognize the people who use common entrances and similar access points so that they can recognize intruders; this means that there are real limits to the numbers of units that should use common entrances. They also want to be able to customize their homes in some way, which means allowing for things like porch chairs, flowers, and yard or window decorations.

It is not difficult to understand that OHC units built between 1964 and 1971 would not have taken these new ideas into account, particularly since the construction specifications of the period were minimal. Even the upgraded specifications of the next round of calls for construction were focused largely on

quality of materials and long-term maintenance cost rather than social appropriateness. Although there were some efforts by architects and builders to diversify built form, such efforts appear to have been based on the assumption that improvements would come from newness and variety rather than from any in-depth consideration of the relationship between built form and livable communities (Sewell 1993).

Functional or social obsolescence is a more subtle challenge. It arises from the intersection of the residents, whose characteristics and needs have evolved, and the stock, which has aged and which has certain relatively fixed characteristics, such as form and bedroom count. Functional obsolescence is most obvious for seniors' units. Some are bachelor units, which a number of LHAs are having difficulty in renting. Nearly half of OHC seniors' units are walk-up buildings. Clearly, seniors in a walk-up building need an elevator, and the solution is to serve them or move them. However, looking further ahead becomes increasingly complex. How much frailer can OHC residents become and still be housed effectively in OHC units? What level of care is appropriate to plan for in OHC buildings? How do these decisions interact with planning decisions made in the long-term care system in a particular community? What type of support services will be funded by support ministries and what type by OHC? What will housing managers do in the meantime if there is no funding for services?

Functional obsolescence also arises for other residents, especially those who are physically, mentally, or psychiatrically disabled. How much accessibility should be provided when renovating or retrofitting buildings? Suppose OHC wanted to bulk-lease to a community support agency to manage units for disabled residents; does the portfolio have the appropriate configuration of units? Should such units be contiguous? Should they have shared common space? Do they need space for attendants or staff? Should some modularization of units—for example, by separate access to individual floors of high-rise buildings—be considered?

What about changes in family size due to international movement of refugees? Is a range of unit sizes needed in all parts of the portfolio to avoid de facto segregation due to family size? Should the corporation be considering convertible units for the future, so that the physical stock adapts more easily to the changing demographics of residents and applicants?

Addressing the challenges of portfolio aging, quality of design, and functional obsolescence requires planning that considers the

demographics of present and future residents, the appropriateness of available buildings, and the need for access to services. Some planning for such questions can be done locally, given the right circumstances. But many of these questions require long-term, strategic planning that is difficult to accomplish on a local level, particularly given increasing resource constraints. Strategic planning and dealing with resource constraints are best accomplished as part of overall corporate planning.

Responses to challenges

Canada saw a significant policy shift in the early 1970s in favor of community-based nonprofits, managed by local boards, and cooperative associations, collectively owned and managed by the residents (Dreier and Hulchanski 1993). The emerging policy shift in the late 1980s, toward tenant empowerment and participation, was central to the federal policy consultation that followed on the heels of the government's public housing evaluation. Tenant involvement was believed to contribute in four ways: improving residents' satisfaction with their housing; promoting skill development and personal satisfaction; enhancing quality of life by giving residents a greater stake in their environment; and promoting cost-effectiveness by reducing vandalism, encouraging residents to take greater responsibility for maintenance, and reducing rental arrears (CMHC 1991; OHC 1994).

Tenant-focused initiatives

Tenant involvement in the management of housing encompasses a continuum of activity from standard landlord-tenant relationships to ownership by a tenant corporation. At one end, the housing authority has full control of the decision-making process. A partnership, perhaps the next stage on the continuum, involves joint decision making, with the housing authority retaining authority to make final decisions. Arrangements such as tenant advisory committees or staff-tenant working groups would perhaps be in the partnership category. Such partnerships may evolve further into tenant management, in which tenants have specific management responsibilities and the authority to carry them out—for example, through a contract with a tenant group for managing an on-site community center. At the far end of the continuum could be ownership by a tenant nonprofit corporation, either outright or through a long-term lease.

Nationally, beginning in the early 1990s, a number of initiatives encouraged housing authorities to facilitate tenant involvement. Funding levels were increased for tenant associations. An amenity space policy was developed that encourages housing authorities to convert housing units for community use and help tenant groups take on management responsibilities for programming the facility. A special tenant participation demonstration initiative funded individual projects to promote tenant involvement, and participants subsequently documented results in a publication and video (CMHC 1992).

Within OHC, LHAs are encouraged to facilitate tenant management opportunities in their communities (OHC 1994). OHC provides support materials and information on successful experiences in the housing authority system and other jurisdictions. Also, approximately 50 tenants have been appointed to housing authority boards, which total 450 members. Ministry grants have been awarded to 134 tenant groups for a variety of local tenant-led initiatives. OHC completed a systemwide initiative, Planning Together, which stimulated a range of tenant participation in management and built on activities that were already under way.

Initiated by the provincial government in 1992, Planning Together aimed at improving the quality of life in public housing in Ontario. Simply put, the program required each LHA to establish a planning committee with at least half the members and a cochair being tenants and to prepare an action plan to address 33 requirements in six areas:

1. Tenant participation in decision making
2. Property management
3. Safety and security
4. Prevention of discrimination, racism, and harassment
5. Support services
6. Tenant selection and transfers

Modest funding (about \$2 per OHC resident over and above the cost of existing staff time) was provided for facilitators, materials, transportation, and child care for participants. The entire initiative was completed in 18 months, including an in-person review of plans with the individual committees, an evaluation of the process, and a concluding series of regional workshops (OHC 1993b).

This process generated a wide range of activities, including the creation of community houses as a focus of recreation and social

activities in the project. In some cases the community houses were integrated with community policing, helping to develop strong relationships with local police and generating measurable reductions in crime over very short periods. Training and skills development initiatives were also popular. In some cases these were approached in partnership with local community colleges, in others with local businesses that placed residents as trainees in local enterprises.

The experience also provided some lessons. Planning Together had several built-in ambiguities. The initiative aimed to create a bottom-up effect but was organized from the top down, setting out 33 specific issues that LHAs were required to address. The initiative was run from the center. The stated goal was to make change, but the outcomes were plans, not necessarily action. The initiative aimed at local solutions, but it left out several critical local actors, including regional housing offices. And it highlighted the LHAs' lack of latitude for innovation—where the LHAs did not have latitude, neither did the tenants.

Nonetheless, in the wrap-up conference, feedback on the program was very positive. At the time of this writing, implementation of the plans was under way and the local actors previously left out of the process had been added. Also, the focus shifted to meeting the intent of the plans in a way suited to local conditions. But continuing positive feedback is dependent on real results. If residents and other key stakeholders are not able to influence issues important to them, the positive results may slip away in the participants' frustration and disappointment. This experience reflects the caution expressed by Sewell (1994) that tenant participation is not a panacea. While greater involvement can have a positive contribution, it cannot achieve effective results without a complementary management structure and commitment (Sewell 1994).

Physical retrofitting

A second and related approach has been the physical retrofitting of existing projects to overcome problems in the original design that have exacerbated social issues such as crime, vandalism, and resident insecurity and alienation. Various provincial housing agencies across Canada have participated and used existing budgets to pursue initiatives in this area. One of the earliest examples, Regent Court in Regina, was undertaken in the early 1980s and involved relatively modest changes to site design, improving traffic circulation and the allocation of private and

public space. Far more ambitious and expensive was the regeneration of Uniacke Square in Halifax, begun in the late 1980s. This 250-unit family project, in which the vast majority of residents were of Caribbean origin, involved a comprehensive site redesign, refurbishment of all units, and the addition of day care and a local housing administration office. The cost and complexity of this initiative may have blunted enthusiasm for further large-scale initiatives at the funding levels of government, especially in a period of increasingly limited resources (Sewell 1994).

In Ontario in September 1989, the OHC board approved three capital projects that became known as "special projects." These projects were located in three municipalities: Windsor (St. Joseph Court), Sudbury (Rumball Terrace), and Toronto (Moss Park). All three were to involve upgrading as well as community development. The Moss Park project was to have an intensification component. A capital budget, cost-shared between the federal and provincial governments, was provided, drawn from existing funds. The intent was that these three projects would address both the built environment and the social environment and that tenants would have full participation in the decisions affecting the special projects.

The outcome of this special projects initiative has been mixed. St. Joseph Court, in Windsor, was most successful and was completed in early 1994. In response to resident concerns about poor traffic circulation, loitering of nonresidents, crime, and vandalism, the existing site plan was reconfigured. This involved the demolition of 15 units from the project, the reorientation of the street pattern, addition of private yards to each unit, new roofs incorporating better insulation and drainage design, and some internal unit improvements. A cross section of activity areas was also established, including open space, play structures, a basketball court, a hockey court, and a gathering space. Finally, a central focus was provided by a community shade pavilion and tower. The name was changed from St. Joseph Court to St. Joseph Square, reflecting the new physical layout and the new community outlook.

In contrast to the other two projects, accountability for the St. Joseph Court redevelopment project has been clear for everyone involved: Essentially, the housing authority did the redevelopment with assistance from the ministry's regional office. The chair and members of the LHA board were actively involved and particularly provided a focus for completion, results, momentum, and accountability to local concerns. A single consultant was engaged to do the planning and oversee the contracts. The only

major delays were obtaining approval from the federal government for the demolition of units and the resulting efforts by the ministry to have the subsidies for those units held for transfer to other units in the province. Throughout the project, resident involvement was tightly tied to the details of the redevelopment. Perhaps because the project was smaller and simpler than other projects and the organization of the work reflected that fact, St. Joseph appears likely to achieve the synergy resulting from close connection between resident concerns and the actual redevelopment that occurred.

In contrast, redevelopment of the other two projects has been fraught with difficulties. Moss Park, in Toronto, involved a large four-tower high-rise project consisting of 1,204 units, mostly for families. The project was complex, involving both upgrading of existing lobbies and laundry facilities—intended to increase socialization and security—and a proposed infill development. Confused and divided accountabilities resulted in no single focus to keep the project moving toward concrete results. Although considerable generic community development was carried out, it did not take advantage of the redevelopment as a catalyst for community involvement and change. As a result, although the upgrading may be successfully completed, it is unlikely to have the positive impact on resident feelings of ownership and proprietorship that has occurred at St. Joseph and Rumball Terrace.

Rumball Terrace is a mixed project with a 12-story high-rise housing both families (162 units) and seniors (101 units) and an additional 42 family row units. The site is rocky and overlooks a lake, but the arrangement of the buildings takes no advantage of the positive attributes of the site. The site is disorganized and has many functional problems such as poor access, drainage, poor sight lines, and unsafe changes in levels. Key concerns of residents have consistently included lack of child care and community space; poor appearance and project stigmatization; lack of unit privacy; dangers for children in a high-rise building, especially on balconies; lack of usable green space; conflicts in use between seniors and families; and lack of access to beachfront property (OHC 1993a).

Although redevelopment was approved in principle in 1989, the project has been subject to a sporadic and protracted planning process. Frequent staff changes at both the LHA and the regional office appear to have contributed to duplication of effort and loss of momentum. Turnover on the LHA board and conflict between staff and board have also been factors. Nonetheless, tenant participation has been consistent and effective, and

tenant ideas appear likely to be well reflected in the results of the upgrading. What has been lacking is overall integration of those ideas with professional evaluation of other site and building problems and professional development of well-integrated solutions. An infusion of new staff and expertise in the fall of 1994 revived the project, and it was successfully completed by late 1994.

The OHC experience with special projects provides some useful lessons. Such projects need to be integrated into the normal way of doing business so that the normal accountability structures continue to function. Simplicity and understandability are essential, since overly complex or completely novel structures render positive results difficult to achieve. Any basic functional problems in the organization should be corrected before a special project is launched. Results-oriented terms of reference are also important and should explicitly incorporate the need to organize planning and development in a way that allows for stakeholder influence on outcomes and not just stakeholder participation for the sake of process. Funds for planning must be budgeted prior to capital funding, not simultaneously. Smaller and simpler projects without multiple actors are more likely to get done. Roadblocks from other levels of government need to be eliminated as early as possible. Active engagement of board chair and members is helpful in keeping a project focused and on schedule if board members have some basic skills, but members must not be put in the position of trying to substitute for professionals or staff. Some training and guidance for chairs and boards would likely be helpful here.

To meet the challenges of larger scale or more fundamental redevelopment, some strategic leadership appears essential, at least to set the guidelines and provide some successful examples. It will be very important to complete the evaluation of these three projects so that these preliminary observations can be validated and expanded. It may be difficult in the future to access additional funding as was done for these projects; rather, OHC may have to reallocate or consolidate capital resources from within existing budgets. This particularly will call on some strategic planning and a shared vision across the corporation. Agreement will have to be reached on which projects are to be put off so that others can go ahead. Better approaches to identifying suitable projects will have to be developed, and adherence to plans and timelines will be even more important.

A model for regeneration: Strathcona Heights

A most successful example of redevelopment is provided by the Strathcona Heights project in Ottawa. This initiative employed an integrated process with elements of both building-oriented and tenant-oriented approaches. The combination proved to be mutually reinforcing to the greater benefit of the community.

While not part of the OHC portfolio, Strathcona Heights shares many features with the public housing stock. It is one of the oldest social housing projects in Canada, built by the federal government in 1947 and 1948 to house World War II veterans at a time of great housing shortage (City Living 1994). In 1982 it was purchased from CMHC by the City of Ottawa Non-Profit Housing Corporation. Composed originally of 404 walk-up apartments, the project is situated on 23 acres at the south end of one of the oldest areas of the city of Ottawa, near a university and overlooking a major highway. A highway access ramp bisects the community. The site also overlooks the Rideau River, but as in many social housing communities, the builders took no advantage of this natural asset. By the 1980s, operating costs were climbing. Both physical and social obsolescence were becoming problems. Strathcona Heights was badly in need of renewal.

Six years after planning for redevelopment began, the community is now a mix of renovated walk-up buildings, town houses and stacked town houses, and elevator-equipped buildings of up to six stories and 80 units. The ramp to the thruway has been closed, and a new bypass road has been built to carry the traffic. All site and building services have been renewed. New playgrounds, landscaping, and community-use space have also been included.

Several decisions made at the outset of the redevelopment were critical to its success: to actively involve tenants, with a head start to develop their planning skills; to involve neighbors early, creating a strong coalition of residents and neighbors to influence political decisions; to house existing residents during and after the redevelopment through a “musical chairs” development process that maintained the social structure of the community; and to use the existing land asset to create additional housing (densities were increased from 22 to 39 units per acre at the same time as the urban design of the community was improved).

The Strathcona Heights redevelopment is significant because it was successful in two ways. Like Planning Together and similar initiatives, it conveyed to tenants that they were valued

participants and stakeholders. It went beyond these other experiences to add an essential element, that of organizing the process in such a way that tenants were able to have a visible influence on the results. This was achieved by equipping tenants to be equal participants and even experts, by structuring the project so that there was something for everyone and all groups had a stake in the outcome, by requiring all architects to subject their designs to the scrutiny of the tenants, and by sticking to the original plan so that tenant expertise was maintained. In the end, an attention to detail usually perceived as optional in a public project was in fact critical to its success.

This reconstruction was accomplished without destroying the social structure. Indeed, the redevelopment acted to reinforce and further enhance the sense of community. Residents have exercised a great deal of influence on the built form, and this has enhanced their feeling of proprietorship, with noticeable benefits to the community. In turn, the built environment has been enriched through the expert contributions of its tenants.

Need for organizational change

In addition to the variety of efforts that have been made to respond to the challenges facing OHC, overall corporate direction and strategic leadership are also required. This is necessitated by a number of factors, including the need to integrate information from across the province, a sense of urgency that precludes waiting for each LHA to work out solutions itself, a need for specialized expertise, a need to apply leverage to other ministries or levels of government, the increasing pressure to apply scarce resources optimally across the province, and the need to build and maintain credibility with funders and partners. Strategic leadership and corporate direction can give the organization a valuable opportunity to anticipate and influence events and policy.

If OHC is to provide the strategic leadership and direction that the public housing management challenge demands, the organization must alter the way it thinks about management. Like many other organizations, OHC has become a knowledge organization. It relies on information stored in its people, the LHAs, and the residents. Drucker (1993) has suggested that, in the emerging knowledge economy, the organization of a symphony orchestra is more applicable than the classical bureaucracy model of organization, with its codified rules independent of any individual worker. Each person in an orchestra knows how to

play a specific instrument, and the conductor provides only the leadership. The orchestra must include all the key players, and they all must play from the same score.

This suggests that organizational leadership should switch from telling its employees how to do each little thing to demonstrating to employees where the organization is going; in short, a shift from specifying behaviors to specifying intent. It also means managing information so that the knowledge of employees, residents, and board members is accessible to the organization, which implies conveying to stakeholders that they are valued and organizing them so that they have influence over results that are important to them. This puts a premium on continuous two-way communication between all stakeholders and corporate leadership.

A key implication of this shift in organizational culture is in the area of control and accountability. In the past, autonomy has been confused with abandonment. Real autonomy comes from clear delegation with defined terms and limits, and it requires accountability. Accountability is not abandoned; rather, it takes a different form. This is especially important if an effective model of tenant management is to be implemented.

What must be resolved is what type of activity is to be controlled in which way and to what extent. The answers will vary with time and circumstance. New items that represent a major departure from the past or items of key policy concern may initially be centrally controlled. As the new becomes routine, the activity may be delegated further out into the organization, and accountability may shift to a more indirect and selective form. This way of thinking about control and accountability releases the organization from the trap of an increasing spiral of rules. Exhaustive detailing of behaviors is virtually impossible in a province as large and as varied as Ontario, and it does not ensure these behaviors will actually occur.

Finally, to manage strategically, the organization must identify and leverage its strengths for change, whether for itself or for its residents. OHC's strengths include a good asset base, real tenant participation, a greater ability to provide corporate direction than other social housing agencies, experienced management, and a reasonable capital budget. Primary among these is the fact that it has housing that many people need.

Within this climate of change, OHC identified for 1994 five key areas of action necessary to strengthen its ability to provide

strategic leadership and corporate direction. The first key area is governance. An internal review of how OHC can provide a setting for good management will address the issues of ambiguity and contradiction discussed earlier that make it difficult for the corporation to establish an image and a direction and to share that direction with its many partners and stakeholders. The scale and nature of the challenges facing OHC, its partners, and other public housing corporations require clearer and better accountability if direction is to be established.

The second key area is an overhaul of the system of rules and directives to the field and feedback from the field. First efforts will go toward eliminating all that is irrelevant, out of date, or simply wrong in today's environment. Key areas of revision will be identified and a framework developed to ensure that the new approach is intention based and leaves appropriate latitude for local innovation. There may also be areas that require more in-depth work, in which case some interim resolution will have to be found.

A third area identified for change is business practices and performance measurement, which will provide an opportunity to develop, share, and reward innovative ways of doing the basic business of housing management. This change is driven by resource constraints and is an example of an area where the organization cannot afford to wait or spend the funds while each housing authority figures things out by itself. Major improvements in performance can be achieved by sharing best practices, and resource constraints can be handled more fairly if performance indicators are agreed on and observed across the corporation.

A fourth area is staff training and development. When new areas of responsibility are taken on, new systems are introduced, policy is changed, or new legislation is passed, the typical response has been a proliferation of training courses. OHC is no different and has many other organizations looking over its shoulder. The corporation is now at the point where some housing authorities state that if their staff took even half the courses offered or required, they would have no time to manage housing. Bringing order into the area of training will reinforce corporate priorities and make headway in those areas, such as tenant involvement, that are crucial to change.

Finally, asset management has been identified for some attention. Resources have been provided to do pilot projects, both tenant- and project-related, with housing authorities so that any

new approach will be tested at the field level. Also, high priority will be given to interim actions to improve access to basic information about the portfolio and the residents and to make better use of this information in making decisions.

Conclusion

Public housing management exists in a changing environment that is characterized by an increasingly diverse tenant profile, an aging housing stock, and increasing restraint. The stock may be in adequate physical condition at the moment, but major capital requirements loom, especially in the high-rise portfolio. The stock may also be functionally obsolete and not match the needs of its residents, whether larger immigrant families, special-needs tenants, families in high-rises, or aging seniors in walk-up buildings. Responses to these challenges have focused on tenant-participation initiatives and on physical retrofitting. Experience to date has shown that initiatives to increase tenants' sense of belonging and control over their living environment have had some success. Physical retrofitting can improve livability, especially where tenants have real influence in the development. Nonetheless, the organization and the way it thinks about management must also change.

Like other public housing organizations in Canada, OHC is facing many challenges. It has responded with partial success, in both building-focused and tenant-focused initiatives. These initiatives by themselves cannot create permanent change and improvement in the quality of life in public housing. The next big challenge is to change the nature of the organization that is responsible for public housing. These changes must enable the organization to provide strategic direction and leadership in the delivery of public housing. Without these organizational changes, public housing will have continuing difficulty in responding to changes thrust upon it. With the changes, public housing organizations may in fact look to regain the leadership role they once had and to point the way for successful change for all social housing.

Author

At the time of writing Nancy Smith was Chair of the Ontario Housing Corporation. She is now a member of the Ontario Municipal Board.

The opinions in this article are solely the views of the author and do not represent the views of the government of Ontario, the Ontario Ministry of Housing, or the Ontario Housing Corporation.

References

- Alexander, Christopher, Sam Ishikawa, and Murray Silverstein. 1977. *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Appleyard, Donald. 1981. *Livable Streets*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bacher, John C. 1993. *Keeping to the Market Place: The Evolution of Canadian Housing Policy*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Butler, David. 1993. The Political Climate, Policy, and Trends in UK Housing and Urban Programs: 1992. In *Papers Presented at the Tri-Country Conference on Facing Up to Housing and Urban Issues: 1992*, 94–100. Washington, DC: Fannie Mae.
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. 1990. *Evaluation of Public Housing Program*. Ottawa.
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. 1991. *Public Housing Consultation Summary Report*. Ottawa.
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. 1992. *Caring Communities*. Ottawa.
- City Living. 1994. *Strathcona Heights: A Community Renewed*. Ottawa.
- Cooper Marcus, Clare, and Wendy Sarkissian. 1986. *Housing As If People Mattered: Site Design Guidelines for Medium-Density Family Housing*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Council on Aging. 1992. *Report on Pilot Project for Aging in Place*. Ottawa: Ottawa-Carleton Regional Housing Authority.
- Dennis, Michael. 1972. *Low Income Housing: Programs in Search of a Policy*. Ottawa: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.
- Dreier, Peter, and J. David Hulchanski. 1993. The Role of Nonprofit Housing in Canada and the United States: Some Comparisons. *Housing Policy Debate* 4(1):43–80.
- Drucker, Peter F. 1993. *Post-Capitalist Society*. New York: HarperBusiness.
- Jacobs, Jane. 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House.
- Jacobs, Jane. 1993. Foreword. In *The Shape of the City: Toronto Struggles with Modern Planning*, by John Sewell, ix–xii. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Kline & Sears/Enviro-nics Ltd. 1983. *Residential Intensifications and Rental Housing Conservation*. 11 vols. Ontario Ministry of Housing.

Murdie, Robert A. 1994a. "Blacks in Near Ghettos?" Black Visible Minority Population in Metropolitan Toronto Housing Authority Public Housing Units. *Housing Studies* 9(4):435-58.

Murdie, Robert A. 1994b. Social Polarization and Public Housing in Canada: A Case Study of the Metropolitan Toronto Housing Authority. In *The Changing Canadian Metropolis: A Public Policy Perspective*, ed. Frances Frisken. Berkeley, CA: Institute of Governmental Studies Press.

Newman, Oscar. 1972. *Defensible Space: Crime Prevention through Urban Design*. New York: Macmillan.

Ontario Housing Corporation. 1990. Report to Board: Technical State of the Ontario Housing Corporation Building Portfolio (February 7). Toronto.

Ontario Housing Corporation. 1993a. Report to Board: Proposed Process for the Rumball Terrace Special Project (August 6). Toronto.

Ontario Housing Corporation. 1993b. Report to Board: A Summary of the Planning Together Process with Recommendations for the Implementation Period (October 1). Toronto.

Ontario Housing Corporation. 1994. Report to Board: Status of Four Ontario Housing Corporation Corporate Initiatives (April 7). Toronto.

Ontario Ministry of Housing. 1993. Application to Management Board: Modifications in Select Ontario Housing Corporation Senior Citizens Walk-Up Buildings to Allow Aging in Place (July 20). Toronto.

Ottawa-Carleton Regional Housing Authority. 1992a. Survey of OCRHA Family Applicants: Country of Origin (May). Ottawa.

Ottawa-Carleton Regional Housing Authority. 1992b. Survey of OCRHA Resident Households: Country of Origin (May). Ottawa.

Perry, John. 1995. More than Bricks and Mortar? The Shape of Housing Management in Britain. *Housing Policy Debate* 6(4):933-58.

Pomeroy, Stephen P. 1993. Synthesis of Issues Discussed. In *Papers Presented at the Tri-Country Conference on Facing Up to Housing and Urban Issues: 1992*, 127-33. Washington, DC: Fannie Mae.

Pomeroy, Stephen P. 1995. Influences on Housing Policy through the Year 2000: A Canadian Perspective. *Housing Policy Debate* 6(3):619-54.

Rose, Albert. 1980. *Canadian Housing Policies (1935-1980)*. Toronto: Butterworths.

Sewell, John. 1993. *The Shape of the City: Toronto Struggles with Modern Planning*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Sewell, John. 1994. *Houses and Homes: Housing for Canadians*. Toronto: Lorimer.

Wade, Jill. 1986. Wartime Housing Limited 1941–47: Canadian Housing Policy at the Crossroads. *Urban History Review* 15(1):41–57.

