

Complicity or Social Change

Housing Requirements and Development

by Pamela Sayne

Les sans-abri et les conditions inférieures de logement augmentent au Canada et dans le monde entier. L'auteure examine les programmes de construction de logements sociaux et remarque que ces programmes ne prennent pas en considération la relation des populations à leur environnement.

The many ways in which the concept of a "right to housing" is understood play a large role in defining how and for whom housing is provided in everyday life. The concept of a "right to housing" is socially learned, and both shapes and is shaped by ideologies about how a particular society functions. For example, ideologies of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class influence where and under what conditions people may live in cities and globally where and how people may migrate. The way a society understands the right to housing is clearly reflected in who has adequate shelter and who does not and under what conditions.

Regardless of national, international, and NGO claims supporting the right to housing, it is clear that homelessness and oppressive substandard housing conditions are increasing in Canada as well as globally. With a global population in 1985 of about 4.8 billion, United Nations' reports estimate that one billion people do not have adequate shelter, 100 million have no shelter whatsoever, and 50 thousand people die daily of slum related diseases (UN, 1987). According to a 1985 study by the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC), half a million people in Canada do not have adequate housing.

Governments' criteria for "adequate housing" exclude considerations of women and children's safety (eg. domestic violence) and life threatening man-made pollutants. Further, those working with homeless people in industrialized and non-industrialized countries recognize that the ways women cope with homelessness and inadequate housing are much less visible than the ways men cope with homelessness. In 1993, global population estimates are 5.2 billion, as global violence and the failure of economies to provide for women's needs increase. It is therefore reasonable to assume that UN and Canadian estimates are low.

The way a "right to housing" is understood from the perspective of communities supported by healthy 'subsistence' economies is much different than it is from the perspective of those living in industrialized cities. People in healthy 'subsistence' economies (ie. those that are self-sufficient and working in harmony with natural resources) value an interdependent relationship with the earth's resources. Communities flourish on the

diversity of their productions which provide for 'real' human needs and depend on the proximity of material that contributes to these basic needs, such as food. The renewal of natural resources, through cyclical activity, is the meaning of productivity.

People in industrialized economies, on the other hand, in practice value mass uniformity of production and distancing of producers and consumers. Linear growth for capital accumulation, destroying life forms while using up natural non-renewable resources, is the meaning of productivity. 'Real' human needs become secondary to 'commercialized' human needs that are aimed at maintaining a capitalist economy.

Thus, an indigenous community, based on a local subsistence economy, is likely to regard adequate housing as being interdependent with the earth's renewable natural resources, not as a structure that distances people and their activities from the natural elements. From this viewpoint, a threat to renewable resources by the market economy is also a threat to housing, which is dependent on the natural environment.

Healthy subsistence economies have different values and objectives from over-industrialized economies. Yet, with the exploitation of natural resources such as minerals and forests and the structuring of cheap human labour systems, there is not one global region that has not experienced the massive loss of homes and a way of life due to mega development projects imposed from outside the community.

In man-built, urban, capitalized environments, housing means more than just having a roof over one's head. However, housing programs are often reduced to measurable components, emphasizing, for example, the number of units built. Concerns such as human values and dignity, safety, security, work/leisure, and community, and the relationship to the natural environment are reduced to components. These concerns are often seen as problems solvable through technology. Integration of housing concerns are put together in assembly line fashion. In this context, it is difficult to produce adequate housing for all. Externally imposed social stratification of communities is often the result.

Poor communities, which are marginalized or exploited by the inequities of a market economy, receive substantially less support to meet human needs than communities which are central to and/or complicit in the ongoing wealth and power of the market economy. For example, the U.S. government spent more on military housing than on social housing for its citizens (Waring, 169-170) even though homelessness in the U.S is growing.

The political will, confined by linear capital growth indicators, is leading to increased inequities and homelessness as the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Capital for housing and other human needs, including food, can easily be denied to communities or whole nations. The level of provision of basic needs is determined by the abstract world of commodity values.

Complicity in the capital driven market economy becomes a necessity to obtain resources that support human life, including housing. Communities are thus colonized, through coercion by the market economy, into compromising life re-producing (cyclical) values in their struggle to obtain housing and other needs. This process of co-option produces further marginalization (or even genocide) through the denial of basic human needs. Within this context, poor people, communities, and nation states compete against each other for inadequate or limited resources that are depleted by pollution or total destruction. The escalation of competition for depleted life resources, both material and social, can be seen in increased violence and warfare locally and globally.

The programs and policies of market economies particularly erode the dignity and livelihood of women. Women have been disadvantaged by capitalist patriarchal ideologies. Through restrictions in programs, socialization and law, women have not been able to compete in private ownership of property. Private home ownership is an expression of patriarchal relations that have historically rendered women subordinate to and dependent on men for their housing rights. That is to say, men are the primary producers, owners, and controllers of housing and related resources and industries, while women are the users, caretakers, and community organizers.

Capitalists, through private ownership, control of decision making, and paid employment in the housing industry, gain autonomous economic power and access to credit, while women



Washing dishes

Photo: Elizabeth Smaller

and other marginalized groups receive little autonomous social or economic security from their activities and do not gain access to credit. The subordination of women has been enforced through the privatization of the housing industry. Similarly, social and economic disparities between women and men are exacerbated through housing programmes and policies (*Canadian Woman Studies*). The engendered dualism (autonomous man and dependent woman) of the capitalized housing industry fosters institutionalized sexism. Heterosexual relations and patriarchal family structures become coercive 'options' for women who must meet their basic housing needs.

To simply encourage private home ownership 'for women too', without addressing other systemic inequities, is not a very progressive or particularly feminist response to a patriarchal ideology of housing provision (Sayne). As Maria Mies has pointed out:

...the feminist movement ... does not want to replace one (male) power elite by another (female) power elite, but...wants to build a non-hierarchical, non-centralized society where no elite lives on exploitation and dominance over others (37).

Women encountering the lack of adequate housing in Bombay have expressed a similar analysis:

As patriarchy derives its strength from private property, our struggle for shelter for women will necessarily be in direct opposition to the present socio-economic system.

The above examples and analysis illustrate how the right to housing may be understood in the context of community values: cyclical production versus linear production. Linear production for capital accumulation has aided the colonizing of women, indigenous peoples, the third world, and nature. More recently,

as pointed out by Vandana Shiva (World Congress for a Healthy Planet) intellectual property rights through biodiversity technology have become the new frontier for capital accumulation. As Ursula Franklin observes, "Many technological systems, when examined for context and overall design, are basically anti-people. People are seen as sources of problems while technology is seen as a source of solutions." Applying this form of logic to the global privatization of biodiversities and increasing numbers of homeless people, it will not be surprising to hear claims that homelessness ('the problem') is caused by a genetic (privatized resources for capital accumulation) defect which can be cured by medical technology ('the solution').

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Social change with UNCED: fact or fantasy

UNCED (United Nations Commission on the Environment and Development) held a series of forums for world governments, non-governmental organizations and various interest groups and individuals. These events were the result of the Brundtland Report on the environment. The report identified global problems such as the need for adequate housing for the public, the depletion of the planet's protective ozone shield contributing to cancer epidemics, and the destruction of our food chain. Even with such desperate fundamental issues, basic to the self-interest of

all, the values of linear growth for the accumulation of capital remained dominant. Nation states, NGOs, and individuals jockeyed for economic leverage, status, and control. Camouflaged by the dance of media and words of solidarity, it was business as usual.

The pressure to conform to values of the market economy, led by the World Bank, the International Bank for Rehabilitation and Development, and the International Monetary Fund is clear, unapologetic, and frighteningly coercive. Recent events in Canada demonstrate such conformity. In the World Bank report of 1992, Canada was commended for:

...major structural reform initiatives, including the introduction of the goods and services tax; the proposals to eliminate interprovincial barriers to the flow of factors, goods, and services; and the modification of the unemployment insurance system. Several Directors emphasized the need for a further reform of the unemployment insurance system and the labor market to help lower unemployment and moderate wage pressures.

These measures were taken in spite of growing homelessness, food banks expanding faster than McDonald Hamburger Restaurants, and desperate unemployment that is supporting increased exploitation of women labourers as well as men. With centralized international control over the economy of nation states, human needs and rights including housing, become dispensable in favour of values of capital accumulation.

Wealthier members of nation states are only recently being confronted with the results of linear capital production. Developing countries along with the poor, many women, people of colour, and indigenous communities are not unfamiliar with the results of the values of linear growth. The experiences of exploited groups were shared internationally throughout the UNCED forums.

As the World Bank was making overtures to dump nuclear wastes in poorer countries, poor communities in the United States presented case study after case study of toxic wastes being disposed of in their neighbourhoods. Environmental racism

crosses geographical and nation state boundaries.

Through a series of international exchanges on housing, community groups from the North and South exchanged perspectives and analysis. International aid in the form of "projects" for housing and development in poor regions was compared to the welfare system in some wealthier countries. It was agreed that the "project approach" ignores the root causes of homelessness, creates dependence, and cannot be maintained without external financing. This guarantees that the needs, design, and regulations are externally determined.

Many UNCED events forged new conceptual understandings of the desperate state of the earth. Sharing differences and similarities of experiences across geographical boundaries contributed to clearer directions and new strategies. The most important "Women's Action Agenda 21" was produced in three days by over 1,300 women from 83 countries. It incorporates an analysis of productivity and human rights values that are an alternative to the system of linear capital accumulation which fails to meet basic human needs and rights.

Women as care givers and maintainers of households and community often have a more direct and immediate understanding of the impact of present development trends. Women and other marginalized groups are struggling against forced economic and political evictions, destruction of water supplies, inadequate sanitation, denial of children's education and care, inadequate health services, destruction of nature, ozone depletion, radiation poisoning, starvation, and war. They are fighting against the values of capital accumulation of the new global economy that have brought whole countries to their knees in compliance with structural adjustment programs and Bank demands.

The Women's Action Agenda 21 is a valuable tool to build upon collective and diverse experiences. However, no tool can replace the ongoing energy of women as they join together in naming their experiences, developing meaningful concepts, and creating analysis and strategies that support life for their communities and the earth. These are activities that must be repeated over and over again until the right to housing and sustainable commu-

nities are a reality, not just a right in development trends.

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August Leaves

Curse those thick oaks!
Too much alive, as if ready to pull roots,
lift branches and take off to pastures new.

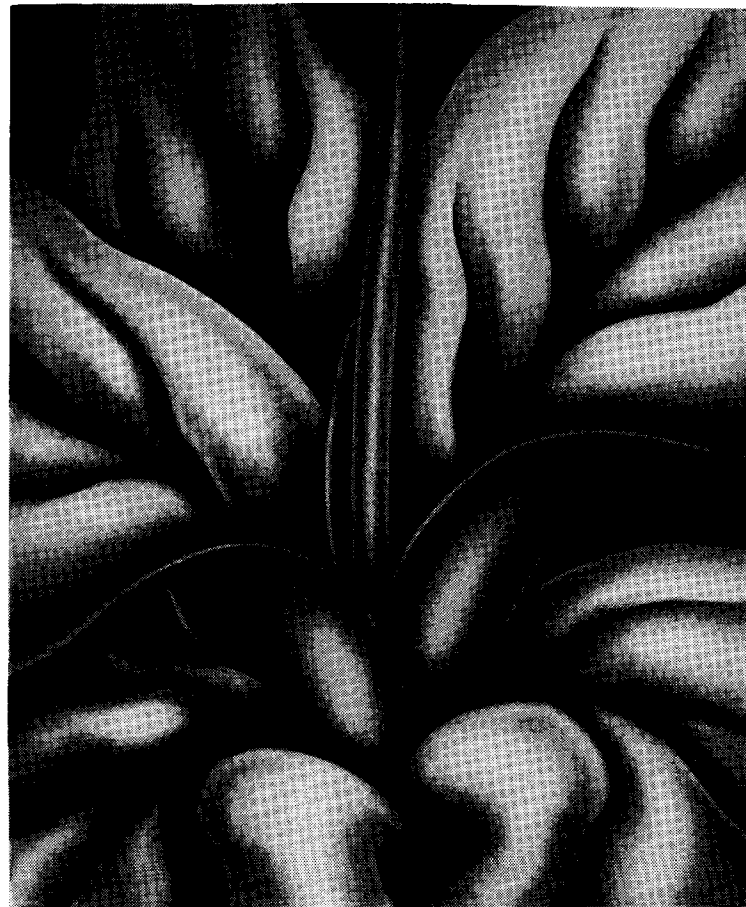
Me, tired in my tedious summer
know those leaves too heavy to live.
This damned energy pumped through full veins

goes nowhere but round and round, round and round.
Trees should know gravity will pull them down
level with the earth. Ashen

trunks stand dumb and leaves rot.
God, I'm tired of this cliché.
My bones dry in black vacuums and the vests

I weave from my hair serrate my skin.
My teeth loosen and fall from my head,
my nails burn hole in wood
and my eyes are blank white marbles.

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Diana Thompson, *From the Rainforest*, 1986
Pastel, 22 x 27"