

Housing Justice Movements

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Settler colonialism refers to both the original and ongoing dispossession of Indigenous Peoples, which occurred across the country. In Vancouver specifically, cultural anthropologist Natalie JK Baloy describes it as a city “haunted by the unfinished business of colonialism” (2016, p.212). The city of Vancouver is both the unceded and traditional territories of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tseil-Waututh Peoples and home to many urban Indigenous Peoples from nations all across Turtle Island. The ongoing acts of settler colonialism, and specifically of preventing Indigenous Peoples from accessing their land as they always have means that in order to do so they have to confront, navigate, and resist the settler state. This is another form of vulnerability that adds to the intense marginalization Indigenous Peoples face in settler society, which has long historic roots but continues today, as structures of white supremacy are still upheld. Haunting is about what is existing in a place but also is often hidden from view. In the Vancouver context, as with much of Canada, settler colonialism structures and processes seem so ‘given’ and ‘natural’ that it can be difficult to understand them as ongoing and still causing harm; therefore settler colonialism can be understood as ‘haunting’ or both in and out of view. Its existence, and the hidden nature of it, repeatedly manufactures vulnerability for Indigenous Peoples in the city. This is particularly poignant given that the city, like the rest of Canada, is Indigenous land.

Commodification of the housing market in Vancouver results in the housing stock being prioritized as a commodity rather than a public good. This process has been aided by the urban growth machine, described as how “diverse and even oppositional factors benefit from the profits of property development” (Hutton & Gurstein, 2020, p.13, paraphrasing Molotch, 1976). In sum, there is significant money to be made in Vancouver real estate and it results in even oppositional parties working together, all of which is at the expense of those who need housing for shelter. Transnational flows of people and capital into Vancouver correspond to “large global trends of financialization and hyper-commodification of residential real estate” and allow them to take hold in the city (Gurstein & Yan, 2020, p.216). Because housing is shaped according to the needs of capital, housing in Vancouver is often built, but it does not necessarily meet the needs of residents to be affordable and suitable, particularly when it comes to having families or kids. Furthermore, the process of pre-emption allowed by the early provincial government means that early speculators (almost exclusively white businessmen) had the ability to purchase Indigenous lands for very low prices - this indicates how inequality has been built into the city’s housing

market from the start (Gurstein & Yan, 2020). When housing is a commodity before a right, people without capital to purchase residential real estate are made vulnerable, subject to the endless demands of 'investment' and 'development' (i.e. commodification).

A significant amount of the visible need for housing justice is concentrated in the Downtown Eastside and Chinatown in V

domination as a means to territorial ends" (Dorries, Hugill, & Tomiak, 2019, p.2). Through 'naming'

hostility in other parts of the city, leading early Chinese settlers to congregate in this small area of downtown (Benivolski, 2017). The repeal of racist laws allowed Chinese Canadians to be educated and establish professional careers (BC, 2016). As they became accountants, doctors, engineers and such, they moved away from the cramped spaces of Chinatown and into more white-dominated neighbourhoods. As a result, new centres of Chinese businesses pop up which include Victoria Drive, Crystal Mall in Burnaby, as well as Aberdeen Mall and Parker Place in Richmond. The Chinese population in Chinatown has decreased as a result of this dispersion. Today, Chinatown as officially stated on its National Historic Site page, is defined as one block North and South of Pender Street, stopping at Taylor Street to the West and Gore Street to the East. The establishment of other Chinese communities and cultural centres in the Lower Mainland has helped facilitate a devaluing of the original Chinatown, resulting in its vulnerability. Even within its established National Historic Site, Chinatown faces gentrification, with many of the new businesses on Main Street sporting the 'Crosstown' name, the new gentrification label for the neighbourhood. Despite this transition, Chinatown still holds value, both for residents within, and Chinese-Canadians outside of it. Without protection of this area, the Chinese-Canadian history and community there will be erased.

The proposed development at 105 Keefer was purported to have been designed as a building that is reflective "...of its context and rich heritage of the area." (Britten, 2017). 105 Keefer is located at the intersection of Keefer Street and Quebec Street, across from the Chinese Cultural Centre. It is currently a parking lot with a trident-shaped memorial adjacent to it that commemorates Chinese Canadian soldiers who fought in World War II. While the proposed inclusion of seniors housing is appealing, the 105 Keefer development was still largely market condominiums, which would bring an influx of new residents and changes to the neighbourhood. The history and culture residing in Chinatown would be put at risk as developers seize on undervalued properties to make the most profit possible. The fight against this building was not just an anti-development stance for the sake of it; it was against developments that specifically would change the character of a neighbourhood that has been made highly vulnerable to change.

In the battle for developing Chinatown we can see four major players; activists, the developer Beedie, Chinatown seniors, and the City of Vancouver Planning Board. Activists include the Youth Collaborative for Chinatown, a group of young Chinese Canadian activists who are

board took the extraordinary step of denying this application, a move they had not done in 15 years prior.

In this report we have addressed housing justice movements and their relation to vulnerability. By bringing in Blomley's concept of the 'property space', we can see that each of its four aspects, naming, acting, bounding, and talking, help facilitate the inequities that housing justice then attempts to combat. Looking at the history of settler colonialism in Vancouver, as well as general commodification of the housing market and the devaluing of marginalized neighbourhoods provides a specific context for the need for housing justice movements in this city. Finally, the case study of successful housing justice activism at 105 Keefer demonstrates that even in the intimidating forces of global capital and investment, actions of resistance are impactful, inspiring, and provide an important voice of dissent to the status quo.

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