

Toronto's Suburban Rooming Houses: Just a Spin on a Downtown "Problem"?

By Lisa Freeman

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Historically, rooming houses in Toronto have been cast as housing of last resort; poorly maintained, and limited to neighbourhoods in the downtown core. Yet tenants in these settings were at risk for poor health and injuries living in unsafe conditions. Rooming houses are a crucial component of private-market affordable housing stock for many Torontonians, particularly new Canadians, international students, and people in need of affordable housing in communities near their family, friends, places of worship, and community services. The stereotype of the rooming house as a downtown issue, has overshadowed this as a form of affordable housing that exists across Toronto. As rooming houses have surfaced in suburban communities their legal status has left them unregulated and has prevented them from being seen as an affordable housing option.

This qualitative study is the first of its kind looking at rooming houses in the inner suburbs in Toronto. Post-amalgamation Toronto has created divisions and inconsistencies between the inner suburbs and the downtown; one crucial housing aspect is inconsistent regulation of rooming houses.

This unique research brings together two distinctive bodies of evidence to explore the narrative of rooming houses in Toronto over time with an emphasis on the suburban experience. First, a review of historical documents provides the background context for understanding how rooming houses have been viewed and regulated over time; second, qualitative data gives insight into the experiences of tenants, housing and settlement workers and city staff. Geographical shifts in poverty contextualize the socio-economic case for the increased use and visibility of rooming house accommodations in the inner suburbs.

Like the battle of the basement apartment, which won legality under city zoning bylaws in 1999, rooming houses need a framework in which to operate and become a better option for those in need of housing. Overcrowding, lack of amenities, lack of privacy, mold, pests, and overbearing landlords are all threats to the rooming house experience. Effective regulation of the rooming house sector is an important step toward improving the health and safety of rooming house tenants.

This report aims to shift the focus for the future of suburban rooming houses, one where the discourse moves beyond the imagined geography of a 1970s skid row neighbourhood and into a contemporary vision of affordable housing options for all.

Introduction

Lushan Lu plead guilty to violating zoning bylaw infractions and was fined \$5,000 for operating an illegal rooming house in Toronto's inner suburb of Scarborough. At first, his illegal operation was difficult to detect. From the outside, his rooming house, "a non-descript, two-storey, red-brick house [with] a two-door garage," looked like every other house on the typical suburban street in the neighbourhood of New Forest Square.¹

The inside, however, told another story. A few years earlier, Lu had converted this single-family house into a private market rooming house with 18 rooms and eight bathrooms. Lu's conviction for operating an illegal business and violating zoning bylaws is just one in a growing number of cases where suburban rooming houses are shutdown, landlords fined and tenants evicted.²

Since amalgamation in 1998, there have been divergent zoning and licensing bylaws in the former municipalities of Toronto, especially apparent in regards to rooming house regulation. Some former municipalities in the inner suburbs maintain pre-amalgamation exclusionary zoning bylaws prohibiting rooming houses in all residential zones. Meanwhile other former municipalities have rooming and lodging house licensing bylaws with permissive but not as-of-right zoning.³ "As-of-right" zoning for rooming houses has the potential to increase the number of rooming houses and, more importantly, minimize the bureaucratic hurdles that exist and designating where this essential form of housing is allowed to exist.

As-of-right zoning, then, indicates that a property is already zoned for a particular use and does not require any discretionary approval by the local government. In the case of Toronto's rooming houses, as-of-right zoning could be a simple option to the complications of providing lower-cost housing opportunities across the city. Rooming house operators would not have to navigate the current maze of restrictive zoning bylaws that only allow rooming houses in particular regions, neighbourhoods, or streets. Re-shaping the landscape related to the zoning of rooming houses could increase the availability of housing for the more marginalized tenants. However, the present fragmented landscape of municipal regulation, with prohibitive zoning bylaws in some former municipalities and licensing procedures in others, leaves suburban tenants in a precarious housing predicament and strictly dictates if and where rooming houses can exist throughout the City of Toronto. The inconsistency in municipal regulations across the city leaves tenants in a vulnerable position and at risk for unhealthy, unsafe living conditions with little protection and oversight.

Lu's conviction provides insight into the present-day situation of rooming houses in Toronto. Rooming houses are considered to be illegal in the inner suburbs and legal in the downtown. Yet, unlicensed rooming houses exist throughout the city. Since the enactment of the Rooming House Licensing Bylaw in

1 Vincent, Donovan. "Suburban house split up into 18 bedrooms" The Toronto Star 4 February 2008. Accessed 6 February 2008, www.thestar.com/News/TA/article/300147.

2 Vincent, Donovan. "Scarborough homeowners charged with running illegal rooming house." The Toronto Star 11 February 2013; Mendeson, Rachel. "Toronto Councillors evade showdown on suburban rooming house" The Toronto Star 13 February 2013; Adler, Mike. "Illegal rooming houses near university and college campus raising resident concerns." The Scarborough Mirror. 27 March 2013. Accessed November 10, 2013: www.insidertoronto.com.

3 Rooming House Licensing By-law. Chapter 285: Rooming Houses. By-law No. 1994 0754. City of Toronto 1994-10-11; Etobicoke Lodging House Bylaw. 1992. Etobicoke Code 166. Bylaw 1978-41.

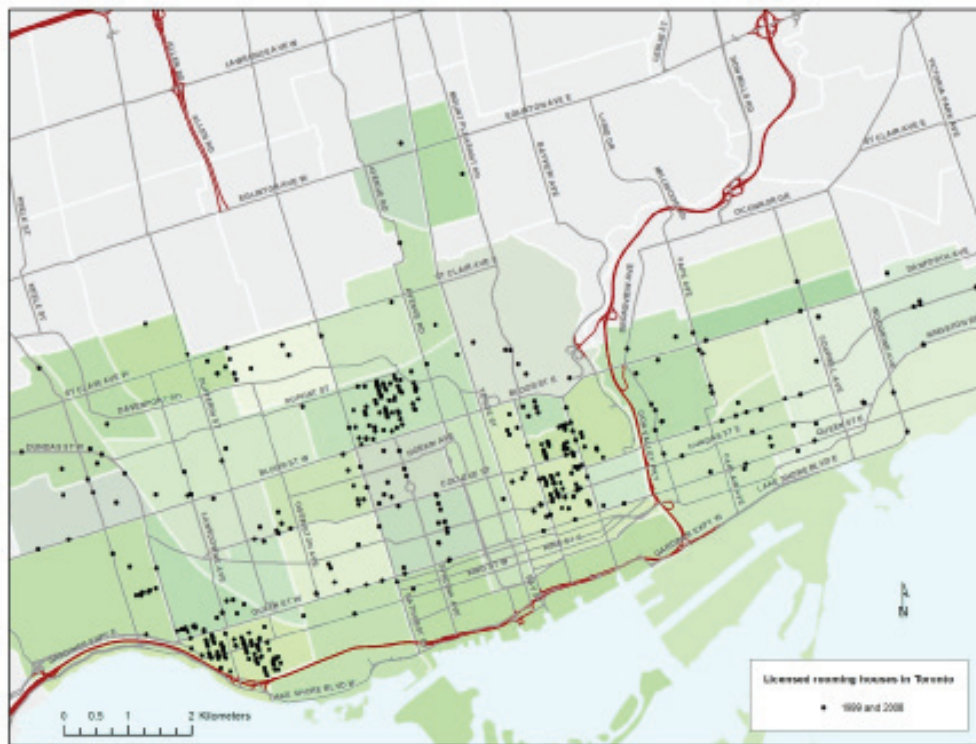


Figure 1.0: Pockets of licensed rooming houses in downtown neighbourhoods (from West to East) South Parkdale, Annex, South St. Jamestown, Cabbagetown, and Moss Park). All of the houses noted in the map functioned as rooming houses in 1999 and 2008 with the reasonable assumption that many of their licenses lapsed for a year or two within these years. The area that is highlighted green indicates the areas in the City of Toronto with licensed rooming houses.

1975 the number of licensed rooming houses in Toronto has been slowly declining. Between 1999-2008 the number of licensed rooming houses in the City of Toronto has remained steady ranging between 483-500 houses (see Figure 1.5). However, by March 1, 2012 only 412 licensed rooming houses were recorded in the Municipal Licensing and Standards Division of the City of Toronto's IBMS Report on Licensed/ Applied for Rooming Houses.⁴

Unsurprisingly, there appears to be an increase in unregulated and unlicensed rooming houses throughout the city. Toronto's new city-wide zoning bylaw, passed on May 9, 2013, has not however adequately addressed the need for new regulations regarding rooming houses. In fact, the zoning bylaw that prohibits rooming houses some parts of the city allows them in others has remained in the new zoning bylaw, a move that has been contested by rooming house advocates across the city. Its continued existence raises questions about the way in which rooming houses in suburban neighbourhoods are viewed. What evidence exists points to a limited reading of the situation. The exposure of an illegal rooming house in the inner suburb of Scarborough, for example, was reported as "a suburban spin on what is often seen as a downtown

4 This number is based on combining the number of licensed bachelorettes and licensed rooming houses as presented in the Municipal Licensing and Standards Divisions List of Licensed Rooming Houses and List of Licensed Bachelorettes as of March 1, 2012. Accessed, June 10, 2012, www.Toronto.ca/licensing/rooming_houses.htm.

problem.”⁵ In fact the growth of rooming houses in the inner suburban communities reflects complex changes within the city of Toronto over time, including growing poverty and a lack of affordable housing in the inner suburbs, not the inner city.

Research Overview

This paper explores rooming houses as an essential and often overlooked part of the suburban affordable housing stock. Although rooming houses have an extensive history in downtown Toronto, suburban rooming houses are not simply a spin on a downtown “problem.” The inner suburbs, also defined as post-war or inner-ring suburbs, are the suburban regions directly adjacent to or surrounding the downtown. Recent scholarly work has documented the economic decline of the inner suburbs in larger North American cities, including Toronto.⁶ The increased visibility of suburban rooming houses is reflective of the socio-economic and demographic changes in the inner suburbs surrounding major cities across North America rather than an influx of problems typically associated with inner city urban communities.

This research brings together two distinctive bodies of evidence to explore the narrative of rooming houses in Toronto over time, with an emphasis on the Suburban experience. First, a review of historical documents focused on rooming houses provides the background context for understanding how they have been viewed and regulated over time in the city. Second, qualitative data, based on individual interviews and participant observation, gives insight into the experiences of tenants, housing and settlement workers and city staff.⁷

Historical documents were reviewed related to rooming houses in Toronto to provide a context for understanding the development and transition of rooming houses over time in the city. The documents review included academic literature and reports (municipal documents and community based studies/reports) over time, with an emphasis on the period between 1970 - 1990. Municipal policies specific to the zoning and licensing bylaws relevant to rooming houses were also considered, particularly when they involved rooming houses fires, the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric facilities in Ontario, and the implementation of pilot projects.

Qualitative interviews with tenants, housing and settlement workers and city staff (n=73) were conducted throughout the City of Toronto with a concentration in South Etobicoke (the Lakeshore), North York, Scarborough, Parkdale, Riverdale, Leslieville and Cabbagetown. The range in interview locations reflects the scope of research and dedication to ensuring that multiple voices in diverse areas of the city were represented. Each geographic location and setting uniquely contributed to this work. Forty-five interviews

5 City of Toronto Planning and Growth Committee. January 8, 2009. City Hall, Toronto.

6 Hanlon, B. “A Typology of Inner Ring Suburbs: Class, Race and Ethnicity in US Suburbia.” *City and Community* 8:3 (2009); Lucy, William H. & David L. Phillips. *Confronting Suburban Decline: Strategic Planning for Metropolitan Renewal*. Island Press, Washington D.C. & Covelo, California, 2000; Keil, Roger & Douglas Young. “Fringe explosions: risk and vulnerability in Canada’s new in-between urban landscape” *The Canadian Geographer* 53:4 (2009) 488-499; Young, Douglas, Wood Patricia Burkner & Roger Keil. *In-between Infrastructure: Urban Connectivity in an Age of Vulnerability*. Praxi (e) Press: Toronto, 2011; Harris, Richard. *Creeping Conformity: How Canada became Suburban, 1900-1960*. University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2004; Keil, Roger, Boudreau, Julie-Anne and Douglas Young. *Changing Toronto: Governing Urban Neoliberalism*. University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2009.

7 The research for this paper was conducted between 2008-2011 in the City of Toronto, primarily drawing from 73 open-ended interviews with tenants, housing and settlement workers and city staff, participant observation and archival research, but part of a larger research project that included participant observation, quantitative data analysis, and archival research. For more information see Freeman, Lisa Marie. *Making Room: The Geography of Rooming House Regulation in Toronto*. Diss. University of Toronto, 2013

were conducted with tenants: 27 in the suburbs (primarily North York, West Scarborough, Agincourt, Kingston-Galloway in Scarborough) and 18 in the downtown neighbourhoods of Leslieville, South Riverdale and South Parkdale. In addition, 27 housing advocates were interviewed, 8 interviews were with advocates in downtown Toronto, and 19 interviews were with suburban housing and immigrant settlement workers.

Given the large sample size of the rooming house tenant population (anywhere between 7,000 – 10,000 individuals, and likely more, scattered between licensed and unlicensed houses), mixed-purposeful sampling and key informant interviews were used.⁸ Purposeful sampling strategies rely upon a strategic approach to identifying stakeholders that emphasizes “information rich” cases.⁹ In this research study purposeful sampling was strategically used to ensure that the key informants reflected the spectrum of stakeholders whose lives are directly affected by rooming houses, including tenants, advocates, and staff working in municipal services. Key informants were identified through city and community-based meetings. They consisted of housing and immigrant settlement workers, city staff and housing advocates in Toronto, who, after a few months, welcomed the researcher into their organizations, agencies, meetings and drop-in centres, and introduced the researcher to tenants throughout the city.

Individual tenants were identified through their support workers, my community contacts. In keeping with participant observation approaches a considerable amount of time was spent getting to know people in a wide range of locations over long durations (this research contributed to a larger three-year-research study). These introductions relied upon the cycles of attendance at community programs and drop-in centres. Over time the commitment of time in different settings (usually two months at each location) allowed for a cross section of stakeholders (reflecting a broader spectrum of respondents than a typical convenience sample, ensuring participation over time).¹⁰

Each interview was audio-recorded (with consent by interviewees), transcribed and underwent extensive ethics review through the University of Toronto. Thematic data analysis was an on-going process, as is usually the case for qualitative and narrative-based research.¹¹ Since the aim of this research was to document the experiences of suburban roomers and to see the social impacts of local law, attention to detail and personal stories and experiences was a focus. Thus, the analysis of this research included carefully categorizing particular themes within the research, manually coding these themes within particular geographical locations, and comparing the results between locations. At the same time, personal narratives

8 Note: The researcher will refer to key informants as community contacts. In this study key informants were actively involved in advocating for the rights of rooming house residents. I find the term key informant distant from the community-based action conducted by housing and immigration workers. The politic of grassroots community organizing does not fit with the term key informant, thus I hesitate from using it.

9 Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (pp. 169-186). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

10 The researcher spent approximately two months at individual locations, whether they were women’s housing drop-ins at a immigrant settlement agency in North York, a church basement soup kitchen in the Agincourt Neighbourhood of Scarborough, a social housing office in Kingston-Galloway, or community centres in Leslieville and Parkdale. Throughout this process, the researcher fostered collaborative relationships with community contacts that resulted in tours of suburban rooming house districts, research-based co-authored deputations at city hall meetings, and a video (“The Fight for Safe Housing: Rooming Houses in Scarborough”) with the Scarborough Rooming House Tenants Group at the West Scarborough Community Legal Clinic.

11 Rose, G. “Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities and Other Tactics.” *Progress in Human Geography* 21:3 (1997): 305-20; Robinson, C. “‘Felt homelessness’: the contribution of qualitative approaches to homelessness research.” *Qualitative housing analysis: an international perspective* 10 (2008). 101; Martin, Robyn & Nola Kunnen. “Reinterpreting the research path: using qualitative methods in homelessness research” in Paul J. Maginn, Susan Thompson, Matthew Tonts (eds.) *Qualitative Housing Analysis: An International Perspective. Studies in Qualitative Methodology. Vol. 10.* Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2008. 61-89; Klodowsky, Fran. “‘Choosing’ participatory research: partnerships in space-time.” *Environment and Planning A* 39:12 (2007): 2845-2860.

and stories were integral to documenting how the landscape of rooming houses have changed since the implementation of the Rooming House Licensing Bylaw in 1975. Overall, the qualitative methods, attention given to personal narratives and manual analysis, provided a rich study of rooming house and regulation in Toronto.¹²

Terminology, Definitions and Clarifications

Rooming houses are one of the most affordable private-market housing options for low-income tenants in Toronto. They represent both a step away from homelessness and a step towards stable and secure housing. Though often depicted as temporary housing for transient individuals, the majority of tenants rely on rooming houses for long-term dwellings, spending 20-30 years living in multiple rooming houses. For new immigrants to Canada and international students, rooming houses are an inexpensive housing option in a desired neighbourhood and an alternative to a financially inaccessible and (sometimes) discriminatory conventional housing market. To appreciate the landscape across the city of Toronto, and the complications that exist in different neighbourhoods, the following discussion seeks to clarify terms and definitions.

Rooming Houses

It is challenging to provide one universal definition for a rooming house because this type of housing occurs in various configurations. In Toronto there are at least 50 definitions under the numerous zoning bylaws of the former municipalities and multiple classifications for rooming houses in the Rooming House Licensing Bylaw (Chapter 285 of the Municipal Code). In general, a rooming house is a building where each tenant rents an individual room from the landlord and shares a common space, usually the kitchen and bathroom. The term rooming house in Toronto often represents a broad range of single-person accommodations such as residential hotels, boarding homes and, lodging homes, amongst others.

There are two general types of rooming houses in Toronto, as defined under the Rooming House Licensing Bylaw: personal-care and private market rooming houses. Personal care rooming houses are often referred to as boarding homes (often operated by non-profit organizations) and provide room, meals and forms of institutional support such as the provision of medication for tenants.¹³ Private market rooming houses, on the other hand, only provide individually rented rooms with shared common areas, usually the kitchen and bathroom. Despite differences in ownership models, business operations, institutionalized support and provision of meals, personal care and private market rooming houses are quite similar. They both are regulated under the rooming house licensing bylaw; they usually exist in converted houses and share a similar clientele. Since the cost of renting a room ranges between \$350-\$500 (significantly less than the 2011 CMHC Average Market Rent monthly rates), rooming houses are one of the only feasible housing

12 For a more detailed discussion of the research design and methodology, see Freeman, Lisa Marie. *Making Room: The Geography of Rooming House Regulation in Toronto*. Diss. University of Toronto, 2013.

13 Canada Housing and Mortgage Corporation Average Market Rents (AMR) for Greater Toronto Area 2007-2011 were \$822.00 for bachelor and \$979.00 for 1-bedroom apartments. See Ontario Employment and Services Rate Chart (<http://www.fryn.ca/system/files/rates-community.pdf>) and ODSP rates (<http://www.ocap.ca/node/19>).

options for people on welfare (\$585.00/month) and disability supports (\$1020.00) in Ontario.¹⁴

There is a strong body of research demonstrating the links between poor health and housing.¹⁵ In rooming houses, the connection between housing conditions and ill health amongst tenants has been well documented. In a national study Hwang et al. concluded that “homeless and marginally housed people living in shelters, rooming houses, and hotels have much higher mortality and shorter life expectancy than could be expected on the basis of low-income alone.”¹⁶

Since many rooming houses exist beyond a licensing and regulation regime, the living conditions can quickly become unsafe and a threat to tenants’ health. If annual fire and safety inspections do not occur, there is a greater possibility that unlicensed rooming houses will deteriorate and risk becoming fire hazards that lead to fatal fires. Thus, regulating all rooming houses in Toronto and ensuring safe houses with properly functioning fire alarms, partitions and fire exists, helps to promote the health and safety of low-income tenants.

Licensing and Zoning

Rooming houses are licensed and permitted as a land use in downtown Toronto and across parts of City of Toronto. However, zoning bylaws have explicitly prohibited rooming houses as a permissible use of land in Scarborough, North York and East York for the past fifteen years. Even after the implementation of the City’s new city-wide Zoning Bylaw, the older zoning restrictions are still in place and the pre-amalgamation restrictions added to the bylaw in regards to rooming houses.¹⁷ Not much has changed, at least for rooming house tenants. Consequently, there are two types of municipal bylaws regulating rooming houses in Toronto: zoning and licensing bylaws.

In the case of rooming houses, a landlord must purchase a license to operate a legal rooming house and the property must be zoned for that particular use of land. This occurs because zoning regulates land use and licensing pertains to people and businesses. However, a larger number of landlords throughout Greater Toronto Area cannot purchase a rooming house license because it is only available within the boundaries of the former City of Toronto and South Etobicoke.¹⁸ As a result, there are numerous rooming houses that are unregulated by the City of Toronto that do not undergo regular inspections for fire safety and building standards. Without regulation, the health and safety of tenants is placed in jeopardy and

14 Canada Housing and Mortgage Corporation Average Market Rents (AMR) for Greater Toronto Area 2007-2011 were \$822.00 for bachelor and \$979.00 for 1-bedroom apartments. See Ontario Employment and Services Rate Chart (<http://www.fryn.ca/system/files/rates-community.pdf>) and ODSP rates (<http://www.ocap.ca/node/19>).

15 Frankish, C.J., Hwang, S.W., & Quantz, D. (2005). “Homelessness and Health in Canada – Research Lessons and Priorities.” *Canadian Journal of Public Health*. 96. S23-S29; Frankish, J., Hwang, S. Quantz, D. (2009). “The Relationship Between Homelessness and Health: An Overview of Research in Canada.” In J.D Hulchanski et al. (eds). *Finding Homes: Policy options for addressing homelessness in Canada* (e-book), Chater 2.1. Toronto, ON: Cities Centre, University of Toronto. Moloughney B. *Housing and Population Health. The state of current research knowledge*. Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Population Health Initiative, Canadian Institute for Health Information, and Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation; 2004; CRICH (2010) *Housing vulnerability and health: Canada’s Hidden Emergency*. Toronto: Research Alliance for Canadian Homelessness, Housing, and Health; November 2010;

16 Hwang, SW et al. Mortality among residents of shelters, rooming houses and hotels in Canada: An 11-year follow-up study. *BMJ*. 2009. Oct 26;339-b4036.

17 City of Toronto Zoning Bylaw 569-2013. Chapter 150 Specific Use Regulations. 150.25. Rooming Houses. May 9, 2013; Advocacy Centre for Tenants Ontario, “City of Toronto Bylaw No. 1556-2010

18 Note: Etobicoke’s Lodging House Bylaw is not comparable to Toronto’s Rooming House Bylaw. It primarily licenses retirement-type homes and hostels, is limited in scope and licenses approximately seven houses in the Lakeshore area of South Etobicoke. Etobicoke Lodging House Bylaw. 1992. Etobicoke Code 166. Bylaw 1978-41.

landlords are not eligible to access conventional financing options to pay for the required upgrades and repairs required for operating a house that adheres to municipal standards. More problematically, operating without a license in areas without a licensing regime is not illegal. There simply is not a license to break. At the same time these dwellings are considered illegal because they contravene zoning bylaws of the former municipalities.

Toronto's Rooming House Licensing Bylaw was amended in 1974 (and implemented in 1975) to include a mandatory license for operators, increased fines for fire code violations and a right of entry for fire inspectors. Nearly 40 years later, there are established municipal bodies governing rooming houses in Toronto including: a Rooming House Licensing Tribunal, a Rooming House Working Group and an active network of advocates, landlords and tenants working with city staff. Perhaps as a result, the number of licensed rooming houses in the City of Toronto has remained relatively steady, ranging between 483-500 houses over the period from 1999 to 2008. However, since 2008, they have been slowly declining, with only 412 licensed rooming houses reported in May 2012.¹⁹ Housing workers and advocates speculate that there are more illegal than legal rooming houses in Toronto, but since there are no regulations, it is extremely difficult to ascertain a definitive number of unlicensed dwellings.

The uneven regulation of rooming houses in Toronto is of concern, especially in the suburban municipalities without a license and with prohibitive zoning bylaws. However, the situation for tenants in the suburbs is quite distinct. Therefore, this paper provides insight on how the built form, tenant experience and regulatory landscape of rooming houses in the suburbs departs significantly from the established downtown norm.

Background to this “Downtown Problem”

Renting a room has a long, albeit controversial, history in the City of Toronto. Rooming houses date back to the early 1900s, if not earlier.²⁰ Their story is intertwined with the history of low-income inner city neighbourhoods and is well documented.²¹ The 1970s and 1980s were a formative, although tumultuous, time in the history of Toronto's rooming houses. Tenants were being evicted en masse, dying in fatal fires and the entire rooming house stock itself was rapidly declining in the face of urban redevelopment.²² Rooming houses became strongly associated with extreme poverty (skid row, homelessness), as well as

19 Municipal Licensing and Standards Divisions List of Licensed Rooming Houses and List of Licensed Bachelorettes as of May 1, 2012. Accessed, June 10, 2012, www.toronto.ca/licensing/rooming_houses.htm.

20 Harris, Richard. “The End Justified the Means: Boarding and Rooming in a City of Homes, 1890-1951” *Journal of Social History*. 26:2 (1992) 331-358.

21 Campsie, Philippa. *A Brief History of Rooming Houses in Toronto, 1972-94*. Toronto: Rupert Community Residential Services, 1994; Hwang, Stephen W. et al. “The Relationship between Housing Conditions and Health Status of Rooming Houses.” *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 94:6 (2003). 436; Richard Ddrla Associates. *Background Paper. Regulatory Practices in the City of Toronto*. City of Toronto: Rooming Houses Issues & Future Options. September 2003; Oriole Research & Design Inc. *Shared Accommodation in Toronto: Successful Practices and Opportunities for Change in the Rooming House Sector: Executive Summary and Recommendations*. Toronto: East York Toronto Family Resources and the Rooming House Working Group, 2008; Peat, Marwick and Partners in association with Greenspan and Vaughan. *The City of Toronto Lodging house by-law study*. Toronto, 1974; Keenan, Jeanette. *Rooming House Tenant Project: Report, January 1st, 1977 - January 31st, 1979*. Toronto: Toronto Christian Resource Centre, 1979. 93 pages; City of Toronto Planning Board. *Report on Skid Row*. Toronto: City of Toronto, 1977.

22 Lind, Loren. “1,400 Housing Units for South St. James, Nothing for Roomers.” *The Globe and Mail* 31 May. 1974; Sewell, John. 1993. *The Shape of the City: Toronto Struggles with Modern Planning*. University of Toronto Press: Toronto; Caulfield, Jon. *City Form and Everyday Life: Toronto's Gentrification and Critical Social Practice*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994.

particular populations and communities (former psychiatric patients in Parkdale).

These localized histories have become the prevailing story of rooming houses. The dominance of this downtown narrative unfortunately leaves few openings for understanding and addressing rooming houses beyond the downtown social imaginary. Nonetheless these stories are significant. It is critical to acknowledge the importance of these histories in order to provide context for understating the rooming house bylaw and debate regarding illegal suburban rooming houses in Toronto.

Gentrification and Toronto's East Downtown Neighbourhoods

In downtown Toronto, gentrification really “took hold” between 1978 and 1981 with thousands of rental units lost due to conversions, renovations and demolitions.²³ During this time, rooming houses were particularly affected. In the east downtown neighbourhoods many were re-converted back into single-family homes while many others were bought, left to decay and eventually demolished for new residential buildings, especially but not exclusively in South St. Jamestown, Cabbagetown and Moss Park.

By 1972 South St. Jamestown, once a solid blue collar worker residential area, was “pockmarked with basement craters, houses extracted like teeth...leaving scars on the neighbourhood.”²⁴ Development corporations demolished houses to construct apartment complexes and multi-residential houses were re-converted into single-family dwellings.²⁵ Urban geographer David Ley documented these shifts in the housing market. He noted that nearly 54,000 people were displaced in North Riverdale and in Don Vale “housing prices more than doubled between 1978-1981.”²⁶ According to Ley, a former rooming house in an older Victorian home in Cabbagetown was purchased for \$130,000 in 1976 and “placed on the market 1982 for \$895,000, after an estimated \$300,000 had been spent in restorations.”²⁷ During this time, rooming houses were quickly disappearing due to conversions and demolitions. At the same time local activism brought attention to issues of community conflict and unsafe living conditions, and the need for regulatory changes to be brought into effect.

The fatal fire at 5 Maitland Place (1974) represents a noteworthy moment in rooming house history as it connects the mass demolition of rooming houses with increased regulation.²⁸ At the time of this infamous fire it operated as a rooming house and was slotted for re-development.²⁹ After the fire, the City of Toronto won 88 convictions against the property owner, the Meridian Building Corporation, and acquired 27 of their remaining 68 rooming houses in South St. Jamestown and revised development proposals in the area.³⁰ Still, this outcome was not completely positive for roomers. It did, however, provide the material evidence

23 Ley, David. *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. pg 65.

24 Purdie, James. “Mini-Bachelor Apartments Provide an Alternative to Rooming House Life.” *The Globe and Mail* 25 July 1972, Report on Business Ed.

25 “2 Residential Towers Planned Next to Bldg.” *The Globe and Mail* May 5. 1972, Report on Business ed; Belford, Terrence. “Infilling Considered Way to Retain Esthetic Appeal, Increase Density.” *The Globe and Mail* May 4. 1973.

26 See Ley (1996) at 65.

27 See Ley (1996) at 47.

28 “No Fire Escape: Rooming House Blaze Brings Death to Five.” *The Globe and Mail* March 9. 1974. pg 1-2; “Meridian Asks Leave to Demolish Fire Site.” *The Globe and Mail* March 22. 1974, 5.

29 Sewell, John. “A Housing Deal in Which Tenants Can Find No Solace.” *The Globe and Mail* June 25. 1974.

30 Lind, Loren. “1,400 Housing Units for South St. James, Nothing for Roomers.” *The Globe and Mail* 31 May 1974; Lind, Loren. “‘Leave Heart at Home’: Behind the Many Doors the Inspectors Work.” *The Globe and Mail* 6 August 1974; Lind, Loren. “Legal Service Asked to Help in Stalling Meridian Evictions.” *The Globe and Mail* 22 August 1974.

required to address the disappearance of rooming houses and advocate for long-lasting amendments to the rooming house bylaw.

Parkdale

The story of South Parkdale, for many Torontonians, is the story of rooming houses. This sentiment is understandable as there have been significant and long-standing rooming house struggles in Parkdale for decades. However, these incidents have assumed a dominant position in the history of Toronto's rooming houses. A position that is a valuable part of, but not the entire, story. Since its inception in the 1880s Parkdale has undergone sharp depictions, alternating as an example of an affluent suburb, to a slum, a service-dependent ghetto and, more recently, a gentrified urban oasis.³¹ These multiple identities signify the considerable change this neighbourhood has endured and draws attention to controversial modifications in its housing stock.

South Parkdale had the highest concentration of rooming houses and bachelorettes³² between 1970 and 1980.³³ Bachelorettes, in particular, emerged during a declining rental market and increased demand for single-person dwellings. Despite this? Local homeowner associations argued that bachelorettes were destructive to their neighbourhoods and by 1976 began pressuring the City to control these illegal conversions.³⁴ In 1978 a prohibition on new rooming houses and bachelorettes was enacted, that, alongside the loss of rental rooms (due to the de-conversion of rooming houses to single-family dwellings) coincided with provincial policies of deinstitutionalization.³⁵ Consequently, rooming houses and bachelorettes became a focal point for community groups and municipal governments during debates regarding gentrification and deinstitutionalization.

The closure of the Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital (in nearby South Etobicoke) in 1979 and the impact of deinstitutionalization in the Queen Street Mental Health Centre (located a few blocks east of Parkdale) in the early 1980s put further pressure on the single-room accommodations in the neighbourhood. South Parkdale became a “major zone of group home concentration” as the number of psychiatric beds in Toronto reduced from 16,000 to 4,600 within a 20 year-span with “over 12,000 ex-psychiatric patients living in approximately 80 commercial boarding houses.”³⁶ The majority of ex-psychiatric patients were forced to live in unsafe rooming houses, many of which were closed due to bylaw infractions, fires and non-compliant landlords, leaving many ex-patients temporarily or permanently homeless.

The continuous gentrification and the demand for safe and affordable single-room accommodation resulted in unrelenting neighbourhood conflict and governmental interventions for approximately 30 years. At least three different control bylaws were enacted to curb the “spread” of and ensure safety in

31 Whitzman, Carolyn & Slater Tom. “Village Ghetto Land: Myth, Social Conditions, and Housing Policy in Parkdale, Toronto, 1879-2000.” *Urban Affairs Review* 41:5 (2006) 673-96; Whitzman, Carolyn. *Suburb, Slum, Urban Village: Transformations in Toronto's Parkdale Neighbourhood, 1875-2002*. Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press, 2009; Dear, M & J. Wolch. *Landscapes of Despair: From Deinstitutionalization to Homelessness* Princeton University Press, 1987.

32 Bachelorettes are similar to rooming houses. They differ from rooming houses because they are one-room dwellings that include individual kitchen and bathroom facilities but, at least in Parkdale, are comparable to rooming houses in built form, cost and tenant population.

33 Bureau of Municipal Research. *Civic Affairs: A Case for Bachelorettes*. February 1982. 59 pages.

34 Ibid at 1 and 9.

35 Shepherd, Harvey. “Toronto Council Gets Bylaw Draft: Plan Board Endorses Proposal to Curb Bachelorette Apartments.” *The Globe and Mail* 31 May 1977.

36 Dear, M & J. Wolch. *Landscapes of Despair: From Deinstitutionalization to Homelessness* Princeton University Press, 1987. pg 108.

rooming houses.³⁷ Two separate Parkdale Pilot Projects were initiated.³⁸ Meanwhile, the Province worked towards safe housing programs for psychiatric survivors.³⁹ In addition, separate regulations were created for bachelorettes in a designated area of South Parkdale. With this extensive history of conflict and activism, alternating levels of available housing stock, gentrification and deinstitutionalization, it is unsurprising that Parkdale's plight is well known.

The Rupert Hotel Fire

The Rupert Hotel fire in the east end of the city may be the most well-known rooming house occurrence in Toronto's recent history. On December 23, 1989, 10 people were killed at a fire at the Rupert Hotel, a licensed rooming house at Queen Street East and Parliament. This fatal fire exposed the inadequacies and inconsistencies in the City's regulatory mechanisms governing rooming houses prior to 1989.⁴⁰ It also spurred decades of community organizing and sustained collaboration between multiple tiers of government and local housing advocates.

Immediately following the Rupert fire a municipal task force was struck, rooming house inspections increased and, a criminal investigation and provincial inquiry were underway.⁴¹ By December 1990, the City had submitted new safety and regulatory protocols to the Provincial Solicitor-General.⁴² The provincial government, then, allocated approximately \$10 million dollars to the Rupert Coalition to carry out a project that became known as the Rupert Pilot Project.⁴³

The Rupert Coalition was comprised of between 25-30 anti-poverty groups and agencies that advocated for better living conditions for poor and homeless individuals in Toronto. The Pilot Project aimed to address the physical and social conditions in rooming houses through the implementation of a community development initiative focused on supporting 525 tenants in private and non-profit rooming houses.⁴⁴ A key goal of the project was to demonstrate that effective regulation and financing of the rooming house sector would improve the health and safety of rooming houses.⁴⁵ By 1993, the Rupert Pilot Project secured

37 Richard Ddrla Associates. Background Paper. Regulatory Practices in the City of Toronto. City of Toronto: Rooming Houses Issues & Future Options. September 2003. pg 25; Slater, Tom. "Municipally Managed Gentrification in South Parkdale, Toronto." *The Canadian Geographer* 48:3 (2004): 303-25. Toronto, Social Planning Council of Metropolitan. *People without Homes: A Permanent Emergency*. Toronto: Urban Policy Archive: Centre for Urban and Community Studies, 1983. Pg50; Shepherd, Harvey. "Toronto Council Gets Bylaw Draft: Plan Board Endorses Proposal to Curb Bachelorette Apartments." *The Globe and Mail* 31 May 1977; Fine, Sean. "Amnesty Proposed on Illegal Apartments." *The Globe and Mail* 12 April 1988, A17; Fine, Sean. "Minister Assails Rooming House Freeze." *The Globe and Mail* 16 April 1988, A14; Lyons, Tom. "The Parkdale Rebellion: Local politicians call it 're-balancing.' Residents call it 'social cleansing.'—and the fight was on." *The Eye Weekly* 29 October 1998. Accessed May 26, 2012.

38 "Ontario and Churches Plan Pilot Aid Project." *The Globe and Mail* 22 April 1983; Fine, Sean. "Sale of Home for Ex-Psychiatric Patients Ends Project." *The Globe and Mail* 5 August 1986; Parkdale Pilot Project: Policy and Procedure Manual. 1985; See Richard Ddrla Associates (2003).

39 Shimiat, Irit & Ryan Scott. "A Boarding House Renewed: The Houselink Takeover of Channan Court" *Phoenix Rising: the voice of the psychiatricized* 7:1 (1987). pg. 11-13.

40 Cheney, Peter. "House Was 'Deathtrap,' Friend Says." *Toronto Star* 27 December. 1989, FIN ed.; "Man Who Set Deadly Blaze Sobs at Recall." *The Windsor Star* 6 March. 1991, Final ed.

41 "Fatal Fire Prompts Inspection 'Blitz'." *The Toronto Star* 28 December. 1989, sec. FIN; Appleby, Timothy. "Most Rooming Houses Don't Meet Fire Rules, Toronto Panel Reports." *The Globe and Mail* 20 January. 1990. Lakey, Jack. "Fire Safety Improved since 10-Death Blaze." *Toronto Star* 23 December 1991. 1991, ME2 ed.

42 Rau, Krishna. "Ontario Set to Move on Rooming Houses. Program Will Upgrade Toronto Buildings." *The Globe and Mail* 24 December. 1990.

43 Allen, Gene. "\$10 Million Pledged for Rooming Houses 100 Units to Be Built in Toronto." *The Globe and Mail* 1 February. 1991.

44 Jim Ward Associates. *Making Rooms into Homes: An Evaluation of Toronto's Rupert Pilot Project*. November, 1993.

45 Shapcott, Michael. (1996) "Rupert Pilot Project: A Self-Help and Community Rehabilitation Project in Canada" *Habitat International Coalition: Global network for the right to habitat and social justice*. Online: www.hic-neg.org, Accessed May 10, 2012.

over 340 units of high quality rooms and was confirmed a success by an independent evaluation.⁴⁶ The Rupert Coalition, though much smaller, continues to play an instrumental role in rooming house advocacy in Toronto.

Moving Forward

This dominant narrative of downtown rooming houses in Toronto has spurred decades of advocacy and continues to shape how advocates and governments respond to rooming houses. However, this imagined geography has the potential to overshadow future narratives. In order for the contemporary moment in the social and regulatory history of rooming houses in Toronto to change, this representation of and accompanying established responses to rooming houses must shift.

In some ways, suburban housing advocates and tenants today are handed a prescription for how to advocate for rooming houses and roomers based on the downtown narrative. This prescription includes an assumption of risks, a routine way of regulating those risks and an established pattern of community organizing. It is based on a social history of downtown rooming houses that is not completely relevant to the contemporary moment in Toronto's suburbs. Consequently, it becomes difficult to understand the new narrative of suburban rooming houses when there already exist preconceived notions and enduring practices of municipal responses to "the problem of rooming houses." Suburban advocates need an alternative story to help them break from the prescribed downtown imagined geography of rooming house regulation and advocacy.

The Suburban Spin

The exposure of an illegal rooming house in the inner suburb of Scarborough in 2006 was reported as "a suburban spin on what is often seen as a downtown problem."⁴⁷ But, this is not exactly the case. The North American inner suburbs are no longer, if ever they were, a safe and utopian middle-class counterpart to the dangerous and immoral, inner city, as discussed by Robert Fisherman in his classic critique of suburbia.⁴⁸ The inner suburbs have always been diverse in terms of population, income-level and built form.

When inner suburban homeowners argue that rooming houses disrupt neighbourhoods "zoned for" single-family dwellings, they reference long-held and outdated beliefs surrounding suburbia, perhaps unknowingly. In Toronto the phrase "suburban communities" can refer to both residents in the inner and outer suburbs. Even though this paper is focused primarily on communities in the inner suburbs, larger narratives and ideologies reflective of the "ideal" suburb are quite relevant. References to the ideal suburb are regularly used by inner suburban homeowners to substantiate "Not-In-My-Backyard" (NIMBY) sentiments, despite the working-class history of the post-war "inner" suburbs in Southern Ontario, including Toronto.⁴⁹

The suburbs have long been depicted as having core principles associated with the nuclear family,

46 See Jim Ward Associates (1993).

47 City of Toronto Planning and Growth Committee. January 8, 2009. City Hall, Toronto.

48 Fishman, Robert. *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*. Basic Books, Inc: New York, 1989.

49 Harris, Richard & Matthew P. Sendbuehler. "Hamilton's East End: The Early Working-Class Suburb." *The Canadian Geographer*. 1992. 36(4): 381-386; Harris, Richard. *Unplanned Suburbs, Toronto's American Tragedy, 1900-1950*. John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1996

domesticity, and home ownership; a depiction that has heavily critiqued from diverse disciplines including urban studies, geography, architecture and gender studies. The idea that the nuclear family is the foundation from which the suburbs were built is a key component to these critiques. Scholars argue that the value attached to the nuclear family, a fundamental societal institution, has shaped the design of and social relations in the suburbs.⁵⁰ The very architecture of the single-family suburban home, suggests Wright, reflects the norm of the nuclear family and in turn has “created a blueprint for the commonly understood ideology of the proper home and family life.”⁵¹

A significant part of this blueprint, argued feminist scholars, renders the suburbs as an “architecture of gender” where gender roles for women are firmly entrenched in the built environment.⁵² Delores Hayden, a respected American professor, architect and urban historian, argues that the prescribed gender roles within the suburban home had a specific function: they “defined not only the labour market and housing design but also the parameters of urban planning.”⁵³ Thus, any challenges or changes to the ideal of the single-family suburban home (such as inclusionary zoning for suburban rooming houses) would not simply disrupt individual dwellings, they would disrupt the norms from which the present day market economy was built, designed and planned.

Homeownership, then, was (and still is) thought to be essential for ensuring the stability and order for the nuclear family. It effectively correlates proper land use with good citizenship. In her sociological study of the American suburbs (1987), Constance Perin described suburban homeownership in terms of the ladder of life that portrays a proper chronology of life based on the hierarchy of land use. Proper movement in this ladder is “substantiated in both housing and neighbourhoods; arrival is manifested in the single-family detached home.”⁵⁴ Any non-linear movement in this chronology associated with transience or stagnation (such as renting or rooming) is, according to Perin, considered to be dangerous, insecure, and a threat to good citizenship and family life associated with homeownership.⁵⁵

This critical scholarship, then, is a useful starting point for understanding NIMBY conflicts occurring in Toronto’s inner suburbs. Clearly, there is a disjuncture between a perspective of what the inner suburbs should be and what they have become. For these oppositional suburban homeowners, rooming houses do not uphold the type of good citizenship (and property values) associated with the nuclear family and homeownership. In fact, the very presence of suburban rooming houses challenges the ideological foundations of the suburbs and the distinction between the middle-class safe suburbs and dangerous inner city. However, the anger suburban homeowners’ voice against rooming houses is not only ideological; it may be a response to how inner suburban neighbourhoods have continued to shift away from this outdated ideal of the suburbs as middle-class utopia.

Despite the persistence of the suburban ideal, the North American suburb is not a homogenous entity.

50 Perin, Constance. *Everything in Its Place: Social Order and Land Use in America*. Princeton University Press: Princeton, N.J., 1977. 47; Hayden, Delores. *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work and Family Life*. New York & London: 1984.

51 Wright, Gwendolyn. *Moralism and the Model Home*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980. 14.

52 Hayden, Delores. *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighbourhoods, and Cities*. Cambridge, Mass & London: MIT Press, 1981. 17; Giles, Judy. *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity*. Berg: Oxford, New York, 2004. 18; Wright (1980) at 97.

53 Hayden, Delores. *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work and Family Life*. New York & London: 1984. 42.

54 Ibid at 81.

55 See Perin (1997).

There are significant socio-economic differences within and between the inner and outer-ring suburbs. As noted earlier in this paper, the inner suburbs are older suburbs built prior to 1969 and directly surround the urban core. They are also commonly referred to as first-tier, inner-ring and post-war suburbs. Inner suburbs are generally known for smaller houses built in the post war period in the 1940s and 1950s and have a lower social status than the outer-suburbs.⁵⁶

The majority of inner suburbs in North America are in socio-economic decline, although significant demographic distinctions do exist.⁵⁷ Suburban poverty became noticeable in the 1980s and 1990s when “income decline, crime increases, and tax base erosion affected many suburbs to an extent previously associated with old industrial cities.”⁵⁸ Lucy and Phillips describe this decline as involving small and modest post-World War Two houses that fall into disrepair in areas with little employment, lack of investment in public infrastructure and “little sense of place.”⁵⁹ For Hanlon, this decline in older inner-ring suburban communities into places of desolation and decay upends the great American Dream of the suburbs as “the bastion of middleclass lifestyle.”⁶⁰

Inner suburban neighbourhoods appear to be declining in a manner previously associated with the inner city. However, according to Thomas Vicino, negative representations of urban decline, as morphing into suburban decline are not happening.⁶¹ Though a parallel does exist, Vicino documents how “the experiences are vastly different given the difference in the age of development and the cycle of decline between the city and the suburb.”⁶² In fact, many scholars have argued that the built environment and social demographics of the inner suburbs are more diverse than previously understood, with the presence of social housing, multi-residential dwellings and immigrant communities.⁶³

A similar pattern has emerged in Toronto. This local academic literature has addressed the history of particular suburbs as places for working people’s homes, documented the varying governing structures and provided critical analysis of amalgamation.⁶⁴ More recently, this focus has shifted towards the inner

56 Short, John Rennie, Hanlon, Bernadette & Thomas J. Vicino. “The Decline of the Inner Suburbs: The New Suburban Gothic in the United States.” *Geography Compass* 1:3 (2007). 641-656; Hanlon, B. “A Typology of Inner Ring Suburbs: Class, Race and Ethnicity in US Suburbia.” *City and Community* 8:3 (2009); Hudnut III, William H. *Halfway to Everywhere: A Portrait of America’s First-Tier Suburbs*. Washington D.C. Urban Land Institute. 2003.

57 See Hanlon (2003); Larco, Nico. “Untapped density: site design and the proliferation of suburban multi-family housing” *Journal of Urbanism*. 2:2. (2009) 167-186; Madden, Janic. “The Changing Spatial Concentration of Income and Poverty among Suburbs of large US Metropolitan Areas.” *Urban Studies*. 40:3 (2003). 481-503.

58 Lucy, William H. & David L. Phillips. *Confronting Suburban Decline: Strategic Planning for Metropolitan Renewal*. Island Press, Washington D.C & Covelco, California, 2000 at 2.

59 Ibid.

60 Hanlon, Bernadette. *Once the American Dream: Inner-Ring Suburbs of the Metropolitan U.S.* Temple University Press: Philadelphia, 2010 at pg 4.

61 Vicino, Thomas J. “The Quest to Confront Suburban Decline: Political Realities & Lessons.” *Urban Affairs Review*. 43:4 (2008). 553-581.

62 Ibid at 557.

63 Harris, Richard & Peter J. Larkham (ed.). *Changing Suburbs: Foundation, Form and Function*. E & FN Spon: London, 1999; Tim Townshend, “From Inner City to Inner Suburb? Addressing Housing Aspirations in Low Demand Areas in Newcastle Gateshead, UK.” *Housing Studies*. 21(4) 2006; Checkoway, Barry. “Large builders, federal housing programmes, and postwar suburbanization” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 4:1 (1980).

64 Harris, Richard. *Creeping Conformity: How Canada became Suburban, 1900-1960*. University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 2004; Harris, Richard. *Unplanned Suburbs, Toronto’s American Tragedy, 1900-1950*. John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1996; Keil, Roger. ““Common-Sense” Neoliberalism: Progressive Conservative Urbanism in Toronto, Canada.” *Antipode* 34:3 (2002) 578-601; Keil, Roger. “Governance Restructuring in Lost Angeles and Toronto: Amalgamation or Secession?” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 24:4 (2000): 758-81; Keil, Roger & Douglas Young. “Fringe explosions: risk and vulnerability in Canada’s new in-between urban landscape” *The Canadian Geographer* 53:4 (2009) 488-499; Sewell, John. *The Shape of the City: Toronto Struggles with Modern Planning*. University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1993.

suburbs. In Young, Wood and Keil's edited collection *In-between Infrastructure: Urban Connectivity in an Age of Vulnerability* Toronto's inner suburban regions are discussed as an in-between city that requires an acknowledgement of different urban typologies and possibilities that are not the inner city nor outer suburbs, but something in-between.⁶⁵ Despite the potential for what Young, Wood and Keil describe as "rich urban living," there is much concern about increases in racialized poverty, lack of municipal infrastructure and hidden homelessness in Toronto's inner suburbs as evidenced in their edited collection.

Accordingly, the inner suburbs have become a focus for research, collaborative projects and have garnered substantial media attention. David Hulchanski's study *The Three Cities within Toronto* and the United Way of Greater Toronto's study *Poverty by Postal Code*,⁶⁶ in particular, have been quite influential. Hulchanski's study indicated that three separate cities have emerged as a result of socio-economic changes based on average income changes over a 35-year span. The cities are geographically dispersed with the lower income city (City #3) identified in the North Western and North Eastern inner suburbs and the higher income city concentrated in the downtown. Hulchanski's study visible indicates the existence of a geographical gap between high and low-income earners and draws attention to a rise in precarious employment.⁶⁷

The United Way's Poverty by Postal Code study further substantiates Hulchanski's findings, reporting on the increased number of suburban neighbourhoods with higher levels of poverty amongst low-income racialized and/or immigrant families and fewer infrastructural resources.⁶⁸ This report identified several priority neighbourhoods in the city. The following Priority Neighbourhood Strategy intended to invest in underserved communities focus on community planning and to empower residents. However, it has been critiqued for problematically associating increases in poverty with specific locations. Cowen and Parlette argue that this strategy has the potential stigmatize racialized communities instead of showing how concentrated poverty is a local manifestation of larger socio-economic problems.⁶⁹ Still, these studies are useful for drawing our attention to the geographical shifts in poverty and contextualize the socio-economic context for the increased use and visibility of rooming house accommodations in the inner suburbs.⁷⁰

Research Findings

"That's the first step. Everything starts at home – everything."

-Jerome (North York Tenant, 2010).

Suburban rooming houses are quite distinguishable from downtown rooming houses in terms of the

65 Young, Douglas, Wood Patricia Burke & Roger Keil. *In-between Infrastructure: Urban Connectivity in an Age of Vulnerability*. Praxi (e) Press: Toronto, 2011 at 20.

66 Note: This study occurred in collaboration with the City of Toronto's Priority Neighbourhoods Initiatives."

67 Hulchanski, J. David. "The Three Cities within Toronto: Income Polarization Among Toronto's Neighbourhoods, 1970-2005". Cities Centre. University of Toronto. 2006. (pg. 6). Online: www.urbancentre.utoronto.ca, last accessed April 26, 2012.

68 Ibid at 10.

69 Cowen, Deborah & Vanessa Parlette. *Inner Suburbs at Stake: Investing in Social Infrastructure in Scarborough*. Cities Centre, University of Toronto Research Paper 220. 2011. Accessed May 28, 2012, <http://neighbourhoodchange.ca/publications/research-papers/gentrification-2/inner-suburbs/>

70 Gajardo, Carolina. *A Road to Home: Working with Homeless Immigrants and Refugees*. Toronto: COSTI Immigrant Services: North York Housing Help, 2008; Preston, Valerie, Murdie, Robert, D'Addario, Silvia, Sibanda, Prince and Ann Marie Murnaghan. "Precarious Housing and Hidden Homelessness among Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Immigrants in the Toronto Metropolitan Area." CERIS Working Paper No. 87. CERIS - The Ontario Metropolitan Centre Working Paper Series (2011). Accessed May 12, 2012, <http://mbc.metropolis.net/>.

physical buildings, location and tenant experiences. Despite their illegality in the majority of Toronto's inner suburbs, rooming house accommodations are an essential part of the affordable housing stock. The following section examines the roles of rooming houses as a suburban form of affordable housing. Qualitative research with tenants, housing and settlement workers in the city of Toronto helps to illustrate tenants' experiences, identify key characteristics of suburban rooming houses and raise questions about the legal ambiguity of inner suburban single-person households.

Suburban Roomers

It is difficult to obtain an accurate number of rooming house tenants in the City of Toronto since the Canadian Census does not have rooming houses as a dwelling form in its surveys and, many roomers live in illegal houses. However, in their 2004 study Drdla et. al. suggests that between 6,000 and 10,000 people live in rooming houses and boarding homes in Toronto.⁷¹ A more recent study (2008) estimated based on the 2006 Census data that Toronto has 165,000 low-income adults who are unattached, many of whom may be living in rooming houses and/or single-person households.⁷² From this ambiguous and potentially large rooming house tenant population, I conducted qualitative interviews with 50 tenants, 30 in the suburbs of North York and Scarborough and 20 in the downtown neighbourhoods Riverdale, Cabbagetown, Leslieville and, South Parkdale.⁷³

Interviews with immigrant settlement workers, housing workers and tenants in Scarborough and North York helped to identify five general types of individuals living in rooming house accommodations: newcomers to Canada, senior citizens, formerly-homeless men, long-term suburban residents and students (and youth). The age of roomers varied from youth (17-25 years) to seniors (65 plus). Most roomers were men. The majority of suburban roomers live on a fixed income, usually Ontario Works (OW) or Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). Some support workers reported an increase in single parents, survivors of abuse, and women looking for single rooms, while others depicted tenants as primarily single men, and international students. Overall, the suburban rooming house tenant population is diverse. Still, a growing number of rooming house tenants are newcomers to Canada, international students, senior citizens, single and male.

The increase in rooming house arrangements amongst newcomer communities is directly related to the rise of hidden homelessness and overcrowded living conditions in the suburbs.⁷⁴ Several immigrant settlement workers reported that many newcomers to Toronto arrive in Canada with few familial or financial resources, have little credit and often gravitate towards living with or near people in their cultural community.⁷⁵ Individuals often find themselves in overcrowded living situations, precarious

71 Richard Drdla Associates. Background Report One: Description of the Rooming House Sector. April, 2004.

72 Oriole Research & Design Inc. Shared Accommodation in Toronto: Successful Practices and Opportunities for Change in The Rooming House Sector. Component 1: Good Practices in Toronto's Rooming House Sector. Final Report. Toronto: East York East Toronto Family Resources & The Rooming House Working Group, 2008.

73 Freeman, Lisa Marie. Making Room: The Geography of Rooming House Regulation in Toronto. Diss. University of Toronto, 2013.

74 Preston, Valerie, Murdie, Robert, D'Addario, Silvia, Sibanda, Prince and Ann Marie Murnaghan. "Precarious Housing and Hidden Homelessness among Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Immigrants in the Toronto Metropolitan Area." CERIS Working Paper No. 87. CERIS - The Ontario Metropolis Centre Working Paper Series (2011). Accessed May 12, 2012, <http://mbc.metropolis.net/>.

75 Dawn. Personal Interview. 16 September 2009; Samir. Personal Interview. 9 November 2009.

rental agreements and, increasingly, in rooming house arrangements.

For some tenants, rooming houses are a welcome alternative to overcrowded situations, especially when there is a relationship and/or cultural connection with the landlord. Samir, a housing worker in Scarborough noted that there usually is a “small bridge” between tenants and landlords, “[In] newcomer communities which are a major sector of the populations in Scarborough, these kinds of relationships essentially happen within the same community so chances are you know [the landlord] or you know someone who know knew them.”⁷⁶ In many ways, this relationship is useful because tenants initially feel part of their community and connected to their living arrangement. However, this multi-dimensional relationship with the landlord is not always beneficial. Tenants may find themselves in exploitative and/or coercive situations that blur the lines between a helpful member of their community and an invasive landlord. Subsequently, (even minor) landlord-tenant conflicts can be viewed as disrespectful to the tenant’s broader community.

Senior citizens also constitute a significant and growing population of precariously housed suburban tenants. The majority were new immigrants who lived in Canada for less than ten years, spoke little English and were dependent upon their adult children. Their need for inexpensive housing often resulted from family conflicts.⁷⁷ In these situations, seniors usually immigrated to Canada to help raise their grandchildren and were sponsored by their adult children. Once the grandchildren were in school and/or a conflict between the adults arose, the grandparents were asked to leave. However, few were financially independent, most were ineligible for governmental subsidized housing and many had no place else to go. Though prevalent, this case is not universal. Several marginally housed seniors interviewed had been homeless for years, were dealing with addictions and financial difficulties and, while waiting for their pension cheques, would couch-surf or rent rooms occasionally. However, all cases involving seniors were hidden and difficult to detect, revealing the extent to which hidden homelessness amongst newcomers to Canada occurs in the inner suburbs.⁷⁸

A considerable number of suburban rooming house tenants were individuals who preferred suburban living to the option of housing downtown. Some tenants had previously lived downtown and wanted a “break from the cement.” Bob, a street-involved senior citizen who collected scrap metal and constantly evaded living indoors, likened Scarborough to heaven and Parkdale to hell. Other tenants were life-long suburbanites and did not want to leave. They knew the area, the shopping centres, bus routes, support services and desirable neighbourhoods. Pierre, a long-time suburban roomer described other tenants in his rooming house, “You had whoever came in off the street. You had from the very low to some of the biggest guys. I’ve seen guys with suits and ties and I’ve seen guys with no shoes on. I’ve seen every walk of life.”

Within this diverse array of tenants a large number of roomers are international students. For students, living in one bedroom and sharing a kitchen and/or bathroom was not a problem. Some liked their houses, bragged about the wireless connections and large rooms while others were concerned about moldy basements and cramped rooms with cement floors. The highest concentration of suburban rooming

76 Samir. Personal Interview. 9 November 2009.

77 Heidi. Personal Interview. 20 August 2009; Cai. Personal Interview. 30 July 2009.

78 Preston, Valerie et al. “Precarious Housing and Hidden Homelessness Among Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Immigrants in the Toronto Metropolitan Area.” CERIS Working Paper. No. 87. December 2011.

houses were located close to universities and directly marketed to students. International students are quickly representing a significant portion of the rooming house tenant population in the inner suburbs. Clearly, suburban tenants represent a wide range of people in terms of age, ethnicity, income and education. Though this diversity is evident, a significant majority of suburban tenants are from racialized groups and new to Canada. That being said, this wide spectrum of tenants (from seniors to international students) speaks to the different experiences and varied housing needs.

Tenants' Experiences

The majority of rooming house tenants interviewed chose rooming houses because of their reliability in terms of affordability, vacancy rates: not for safety, security or cleanliness. For most tenants, rooming houses are a sufficient and dependable living situation, not an ideal one. However, many tenants shared an attachment to their neighbourhoods, were on waiting lists for social housing and most women expressed concerns about rooming house accommodations. These common experiences, patterns and observations are independent from the debates surrounding zoning and licensing bylaws. Few suburban tenants mentioned the illegality of the situation as a deterrent to rooming house living.

A large portion of tenants interviewed expressed an emotional attachment to their neighbourhood, not to their rooming house. There were personal reasons for doing so: being close to family, wanting to remain in their neighbourhood and live in close proximity to people from their country of origin. However, the one unifying factor that many tenants articulated was the number of families that lived nearby. For many suburban roomers, living in a family-oriented neighbourhood was a selling point and provided a level of comfort. Few, if any, had any negative interactions with their neighbourhoods and most felt welcomed, an interesting contrast to the NIMBYism historically observed in downtown communities.

The majority of women interviewed did not want to live in rooming houses and, for the most part, had negative experiences. Many disclosed feeling uncomfortable living with strange men. All of the women who were mothers firmly stated that they would not raise their children in a rooming house, in part, because of the unhealthy living conditions and other tenants, but primarily because of custody concerns and financial support. Most women were on waiting lists for social housing and would prefer to couch-surf and temporarily live with family. Rooming houses are often an option of last resort for most people, and for some functioned as an ad hoc "waiting room." A large number of suburban rooming house tenants were on waiting lists for Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) housing. Given that the average waiting time for TCHC housing is 7 to 10 years, people were living in rooming houses for extended periods of time.

By and large, the tenant experience in suburban rooming houses was quite mixed. Suburban rooming houses, with newer and larger rooms, laundry facilities, free wireless internet access and, communal televisions, appeared to be better places to live than their downtown counterparts. Even though complaints rarely included infestations, drug dealing and poor electrical wiring, suburban rooming houses were not perfect. Many people complained of mold, inadequate living space, and prying landlords. Suburban tenants disclosed conflicts with their landlords, but when they did, they were focused on questions of cultural community, racism and upgrades to their rooms. Yet few actually confronted their landlords, especially those who knew the illegality of their living situation and the potential for eviction and fear of the City shutting down the house.

The most common characteristic amongst suburban rooming house tenants was that few identified as a “roomer,” unlike their downtown counterparts. Thus, it is not surprising that they did not know about the rooming house bylaw, the opposition to their housing situation, and the heated debates around extending the bylaw to the inner suburbs. However, this lack of identification as roomer may reflect the built form than it does with the illegality of the situation. Many suburban roomers live in converted basement apartments, single-family homes and multi-residential dwellings. Three primary reasons surfaced for residents living in rooming houses: proximity to family and neighbourhood, perception of the housing as temporary accommodation and, the notion of the accommodation as last resort housing. Yet suburban tenants may not identify as roomers because of the illegality of the dwelling, the lack of knowledge around this housing type and the multiple living arrangements “rooming” encompasses. However, from my research it became apparent that suburban rooming houses are a living arrangement that is not contingent on a particular type of building.

Rooming Arrangements, not Rooming Houses

Suburban rooming houses, unlike their downtown counterparts, are not visibly concentrated in one or two (formerly or gentrifying) low-income neighbourhoods—likely because high concentrations of older rundown multi-storied Victorian homes do not exist in the suburbs. Instead, they are present in newer and older suburban homes, that can range in size and configuration from bungalows to monster homes, and often take the form of converted basements. In addition, they appear to be a flexible living arrangement found in a variety of building types. For the most part, rooming houses in the inner suburbs vary in physical appearance, are geographically dispersed, and often blend into the suburban landscape.

Suburban rooming houses are difficult to detect, at least from the outside. The identifying characteristics of (many) downtown rooming houses – peeling paints, curtain-less windows, front porches with tenants smoking and tin cans filled with cigarette butts – are not particularly useful. Two houses in particular stood out in my research. One was a small-red-bricked post-war bungalow in excellent condition with neatly trimmed hedges and a small fence bordering the property. The other was a large two-storey, yellow brick house with a three-car garage and a visible home gym in the living room. If you looked closely you could see that the side door near the garage led to a basement, which according to a housing outreach worker interviewed, was a rooming house. Both of these houses were known rooming houses but did not fit the downtown “norm.”

The typical suburban rooming house has three or more rental rooms, a common kitchen and a shared bathroom, all in the basement. Living conditions vary considerably in terms of cleanliness, size and tenant contentment, and are usually depending on the age and size of the house. A few tenants happily reported free internet, a big screen television and spacious bedrooms. One woman reported living in a “huge suburban house” with a bedroom large enough to fit a queen bed and computer table. But, not all the houses are as nice and spacious. Many tenants complained of small windowless bedrooms, the lack of screens on windows, black mold and intrusive or controlling landlords.

The majority of rental rooms – or rooming houses arrangements – in the suburbs were located in converted basements, resulting in a certain amount of confusion between rooming houses and basement apartments. Thus, it is understandable that tenants do not readily identify as roomers because rooming

house arrangements often look similar to basement apartments. Sally, a younger woman searching for a two-bedroom apartment with a friend was quick to discern that the basement apartment she was viewing was, in fact, a rooming house:

The (land)lady said new carpet, window covers, we were like “oh yes, scored, it’s only like \$700.00.” She said, “you have to enter through my house”... to get to a basement door and go down these really crappy steps. We got down there and as soon as you got to the bottom of the stairs there was a sink and maybe a foot and a half of counter spaces, then a stove and fridge. And, there were all these doors. It was done up like a rooming house.... The doors had locks. I said, “I thought that this was a two-bedroom.” She said, “it is.” ... Then she said, [pointing to the other bedroom doors], “this isn’t your space and this isn’t your space but this part and these two rooms are your area and the bathroom.”⁷⁹

Not all basements are crowded nor landlords as unclear (or purposefully deceitful) about the distinction between rooming houses and basement apartments, as depicted in Sally’s experience. The downtown stereotype of a slumlord is sometimes but not universally applicable. One Scarborough housing worker noted that newcomers to Canada who rely on renting rooms to supplement their mortgage operate an increasing number of rooming houses. While another knew of a nurse who rented out rooms and was a great landlord. Although the financial incentives and physical layout of suburban homes (with large basements) is reason enough for an increased presence of rooming houses in converted basements, the association with legalized basement apartments is likely a driving force behind this housing pattern, at least in Scarborough.

Basement apartments, unlike rooming houses, are a permitted use under zoning bylaws in Scarborough. Homeowners are allowed to rent rooms for a maximum of two boarders within their living quarters and convert their basements into small apartments. In fact, basement apartments (also referred to as granny flats and second suites) were legalized in 1999, after 10 years of heated debates.⁸⁰ At that time, basement apartments represented one-fifth of the entire rental stock in the former municipality of Scarborough, but (like rooming houses today) were not a permissible land use under local laws. Even though the legalization of basement apartments was a great victory for suburban renters in 1999, it is clear that more needs to be done.

The fact that basement apartments are increasingly becoming de facto rooming houses is an interesting development. First, it indicates that current allowances for granny flats and basement apartments are not meeting the needs of suburban tenants. Second, it must be a profitable venture for landlords because it is increasingly the norm for single-person households. Thirdly, it provides an example of low-income housing and municipal regulation that, unlike the rooming house bylaw is based on the suburban experience and very much applicable to the current situation of illegal rooming houses.

The exact composition of a suburban rooming house arrangement depends on the landlord and the suburb in which they exist. Even though rooming house style arrangements in converted basement apartments appear to be the new norm, there are many other types of rooming house arrangements

79 Sally. Personal Interview. 30 September 2009.

80 Mooney, Paul “Granny Flats Okayed to Ease Crisis.” Toronto Star 13 May 1999. Proquest.; Lwington, Jennifer. “Second Suites Narrowly Approved Toronto Votes for Proposal that may add 2,000 more Basement Apartments and Flats a Year.” The Globe and Mail 30 July 1999; Robinson, John. “Push for More Affordable Housing May Ease Zoning on Accessory Units.” Toronto Star 3 June 1990; McClellan, Scott. “Basement Apartment Showdown.” Toronto Star 9 August 1992, SU2 ed.

in the inner suburbs. They were present in converted monster homes, the basement of typically two-storey suburban family homes and, quite often, in modest, older bungalows.

For Kevin, a Scarborough tenant, his rooming house was “...actually a basement. It’s a big house. The landlord lives in the main house and I live in the basement with a few other people. There is about six of us.”⁸¹ Aquasi, an 18 year-old North York tenant who had never lived in rooming houses before, lived in a basement where there were “people living in corners” and in the garage. He stayed in the house because he “had an actual room.”⁸² Pierre, a Scarborough tenant who had previously rented and slept in the living room of rooming house, remarked on the lack of privacy he experienced, “When you want to sleep—that’s when I go to sleep. When you get up I have to get up because I am in the living room... You don’t have nothing private.” He described the “average” rooming house in his neighbourhood in Scarborough

It’s just a regular two level house. Some of them have like a second level and they put all the rooms... like you’ll have four or five rooms in the basement. They subdivide it all into rooms and have one little kitchen and a little dining area. And, the top floor will be their kitchen...it depends on how the [landlord] sets it up. It depends on how much money they want to make. A lot of places when you will say I want a room – it’s exactly what you get – it’s a room. It an 8x10 and you get your bed and a dresser, you put your t.v. in and that’s all the room you’ve got. That’s a rooming house. That’s \$400.00 [per month].⁸³

Rooming houses were found in privately owned, rented and communally owned houses. Some were located in small one or two-bedroom apartments where the rooming house operators (often a renter himself) would place multiple mattresses on the floors of living rooms and bedrooms, sleeping several people to a room (sometimes sleeping in shifts to maximize rent and usage). Thus, this research indicates that rooming houses are more of a living arrangement than a built form, especially in the suburbs.

Overall, suburban rooming houses reflect the pre-established legal landscape of affordable housing in each suburb and rely on informal processes (through specific cultural communities) of procuring stable temporary housing. Even though rooming houses are technically prohibited and difficult to identify in the inner suburbs, they do exist in large numbers. The illegality of their existence does not seem to be a deterrent to tenants or landlords. However, the law does matter.

Questions of Legality

Suburban rooming house tenants live in a precarious legal space. Their housing is considered legal and illegal under various governmental jurisdictions. All rooming houses are legal under Ontario’s Residential Tenancy Act, as long as the landlord lives on site.⁸⁴ Even so, they are perceived to be illegal due to the lack or absence of permits within local zoning bylaws.

Although rooming houses are recognized and defined within zoning bylaws, they have different land use designations and have been purposefully legislated out of suburban neighbourhoods by exclusionary

81 Kevin. Personal Interview. 28 September 2009.

82 Aquasi. Personal Interview. 1 December 2010.

83 Pierre. Personal Interview. 29 September. 2009.

84 Residential Tenancy Act, 2006, S.O. 2006, c. 17.

zoning bylaws that prohibit rooming houses as a permitted land use. In addition, suburban rooming house arrangements are deemed illegal simply because they are not licensed. Scarborough and North York do not have licensing bylaws. There is simply not a license to break. Plus, the parameters of the rooming house bylaw and lodging house bylaw are enforced only within the former jurisdictions of City of Toronto and City of Etobicoke. Thus, rooming house arrangements in the inner suburbs are unlicensed simply because a licensing procedure does not exist and are classified as illegal because they violate zoning bylaws.

It is a tricky legal situation. Thus, it is unsurprising that the majority of suburban rooming house tenants did not know about the rooming house licensing bylaw or the debates around extending it to the suburbs. Though when asked, the majority of tenants had strong opinions about the regulation of their housing. Downtown tenants generally supported the license even though they chose houses for their affordability, not legality. Suburban tenants, on the other hand, had surprisingly diverse and disparate reactions. Several tenants were adamantly opposed to further governmental interference in their lives and questioned whether landlords would even comply with a new bylaw. Many women suggested regulations that created women-only rooming houses. While others raised general concerns about the need for social housing, government transparency and accessibility. However, there were several tenants that were enthusiastically in favour of a licensing bylaw in the suburbs, equating it with basic human rights.

For the most part, there appears to be a considerable lack of knowledge regarding the legality or illegality of rooming houses amongst suburban tenants, landlords and ward councilors. This ignorance, however, may be purposeful in the case of landlords evading the zoning bylaw or strategic for tenants avoiding eviction. Regardless of motivation, the majority of tenants were unaware they were living in rooming house arrangements and that their dwelling was illegal. This lack of information combined with calls for increased crack down on illegal suburban dwellings is not only harmful for individual tenants and landlords; it is detrimental to the growth of affordable housing for low-income individuals in Toronto's inner suburbs.

It is not surprising that arguments for and against extending the rooming house bylaw are gaining momentum in and beyond city hall.⁸⁵ There is a clear need for rooming house arrangements in the inner suburbs, an area of the city already diverse in terms of housing forms, cultural communities and income groups. The increase in suburban rooming houses is, yet another, indication that the inner suburbs are a diverse (sub)urban region and no longer, if ever, were explicitly designed and zoned for single-family homes, as oppositional homeowners would suggest.

Extending the downtown rooming house bylaw into the inner suburbs is an understandable argument. However, it may not be the best option. The rooming house bylaw was amended during a particular moment in the history of downtown rooming houses. Though not an effective tenants' rights mechanism, the Rooming House Licensing Bylaw is a useful tool for raising the issue of unequal municipal regulations through the City of Toronto and keeping rooming houses on the municipal agenda. Problematically, the rooming house bylaw simply is not applicable to the post-amalgamated inner suburbs.

85 Freeman, Lisa. "Three Alarm Warning for Rooming Houses" Opinion Editorial. The Toronto Star. 14 April 2010; Moloney, Paul. "Toronto needs to take action on Rooming Houses, Planning Chair Peter Milczyn urges." The Toronto Star. 21 March 2014.

The legal context of suburban rooming houses differs substantially from the downtown norm, even if the supply and demand for affordable single-room housing is similar. The research discussed in this paper indicates that rooming house arrangements, as they are understood and experienced in the suburbs, depart in terms of physical buildings, tenant-landlord relations and tenant populations that the downtown norm. They are, in fact, a suburban phenomenon. This may reflect the unresolved bureaucratic and regulatory challenges of amalgamation for the city of Toronto.

Conclusion

The history of rooming houses in the city is a challenging one, heavily influenced by a particular narrative of poverty, unsafe conditions, and vulnerable populations. In order to shift the focus for the suburban future of rooming houses, the discourse must move beyond the imagined geography of a 1970s skid row neighbourhood.

Though their vulnerabilities are different from the experiences of downtown tenants, tenants in suburban rooming houses still face challenging conditions. There are still powerful stories of poor conditions and coercive situations that can undermine the health and safety of tenants. Tenants complained of black mold, windowless rooms and unreasonable house rules set by the landlord. In addition, tenants experienced racism and, in one situation, a tenant was told by the landlord not to cook her traditional foods. The illegality of their living situation leaves suburban tenants in a unique and difficult bind. Many are nervous to confront the landlords; few know what standing they (as roomers) have under municipal law and most are concerned about the stability of their housing.

For some suburban tenants, the illegality of rooming houses under municipal law was a question of human rights. Sritharan, an experienced political activist, was very clear in connecting his personal experiences with his ideas for change:

I am a Scarborough resident and have been living in Scarborough, in so-called illegal rooming houses for the last four years in many parts of the city...I know there are many illegal rooming houses in my neighbourhood. I don't want my friends to end up on the streets. Rooming houses are not our houses [or] our homes. We don't want to be on the street or homeless. Rooming houses not only give people like me to have home, they also help landlords pay their mortgage. I am a person with epilepsy and I am emotionally disturbed due to a war in my country. Due to my health concerns and economic status I am now in this living condition. I see many new immigrants living with low-income in the same situations as me. We are already facing so many barriers in the city due to our status and health. Not allowing rooming houses in our neighbourhoods adds another barrier by making us live in illegal houses. It is another barrier to our most basic right, affordable housing. I am shocked and I do not understand why I have been treated differently from other tenants who have more money and better health. Why am I not allowed to live in our city and our own neighbourhoods that I have lived in for years? Why can't I find a

home for \$350.00 near my family, friends, church and temple?⁸⁶

The social context and legal landscape, and the needs of tenants, in the inner suburbs is quite different. It is essential to understand the legal landscape of the inner suburbs themselves, critically analyze and advocate for changes to the governing practices within the post-amalgamated city of Toronto. While residents remain vulnerable in critical ways that should not be overlooked, this research also points to the potential for rooming houses as an option for affordable housing in the city of Toronto.

The key moments in the genealogy of rooming houses in Toronto provide a background for action and analysis; however, they should not limit the framework for future tenants, advocates and governing practices throughout the inner suburbs. That being said, it is important to build from, not replicate past regulatory responses in our policy approaches to illegal rooming houses. A universal “rooming house bylaw” for the city of Toronto may prove helpful as one route for local action. However, it is critical to recognize that rooming house accommodations in the suburbs often reflect a living arrangement, not a built form. Thus, it would be difficult to adapt the particularities of the current downtown Rooming House Licensing bylaw to meet the multiple variations on a ‘rooming house’ in the inner suburbs. In order to ensure safe housing conditions and protect the health of low-income tenants, more complex municipal policies may be needed.

In drafting policy responses to the challenging web of municipal governance surrounding unlicensed rooming houses there may be value in re-defining rooming houses as shared accommodations, advocating for broader regulations across the city to include multiple forms of single-room occupancy dwellings and seriously consider expanding already existing bylaws (i.e. second suites and basement apartments) in the suburbs.

It is essential to engage policy makers at the municipal level to begin addressing the need for safe and healthy rooms for low-income tenants in Toronto’s inner suburbs beyond our downtown frameworks. We need to ask series of connected questions: who are the tenants who live in rooming houses across the city; how are the needs of tenants in the suburbs different from the downtown; who are the rooming house landlords in the suburbs and, how can we collectively respond to these changing needs.

Ultimately, the first step in making lasting change starts with education. There are a growing number of active and established rooming house tenants and anti-poverty activists in Toronto’s inner suburbs. Yet, there is little municipal infrastructure similar to the history of rooming houses with working groups, non-profit interventions, tribunals and landlord financing that was present in the downtown.

In order to ensure safe, affordable and healthy living for all low-income tenants in Toronto’s inner suburbs, further support and advocacy is needed to provide tenants and landlords with the information they need to operate and advocate for safe and legal rooming house accommodations. And, this all begins with drafting new and inclusive zoning bylaws for rooming houses (not maintaining the status quo) in the new City-wide zoning bylaw and potentially drafting a new single-room dwelling (or shared accommodation) bylaw for the entire city.

Suburban rooming houses are not just a spin on a downtown norm; they are a necessary form of affordable

86 Sriatharan. Rupert Memorial Service. Public Speech. December 2009.

housing and should be addressed and regulated. Ensuring the safe and secure housing stock that low-income tenants need is only going to increase in urgency across the city. A fatal fire in a Kensington Market rooming house in March 2014 killed two tenants and injured more, again raising questions about the number of illegal rooming houses in Toronto and the adequacy of regulatory measures.⁸⁷ Rooming houses in the suburbs continue to be illegal and shutdown despite their necessity in suburban neighbourhoods.⁸⁸ The living situations in rooming houses continue to be precarious despite 30 years of municipal attention and community organizing. The struggle for safe and secure rooming house accommodations continues, leaving many tenants—most of whom are low-income, newcomers to Canada and international students, in insecure conditions. Licensing suburban rooming houses is a necessary step toward securing and increasing the safety and livability of a much-needed form of affordable housing in Toronto.

87 McKnight, Zoe. “Two dead, 10 injured after three-alarm Kensington Market fire: Tragedy may have involved an illegal rooming house housing new immigrants and low-income tenants.” *The Toronto Star* 20 March 2014.

88 Vincent, Donovan. “Scarborough Homeowners Charted with running illegal rooming house.” *The Toronto Star*. 11 February 2013.

Appendix 1: Data Sources

Research Participants (N=73)

Rooming House Advocates & Support Workers (27)

Downtown (8)

Housing Workers: 5

Immigrant Settlement Workers: 1

City Officials: 2

Etobicoke (9)

Housing Workers: 2

Housing Advocates: 7

Scarborough (7)

Immigrant Settlement Workers: 2

Housing Workers: 5

North York (3)

Immigrant Settlement Workers: 2

Rooming House Residents and Tenants (45)

Downtown: 18

Scarborough: 16

North York: 11

