

**Housing Language in Vancouver**

by

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## **Abstract**

In April 2021, Vancouver City Council approved a motion to “improve social housing” by upzoning two residential districts on the east and south sides of the city from four to six stories. Densification, city planners and officials argued, would not only unlock federal funding to help redevelop some 100+ “non-market,” “aging” properties; it would also help concentrate, and thus decarbonize, the city’s energy-inefficient sub-urban form. In a win-win move, Vancouver could fight the housing and climate crises with a single policy. This project investigates how a language of housing redevelopment has worked in the (re)production of Vancouver, British Columbia over the last century.

Chapter 1 is a wide history of ‘density’ in three acts. First, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, early Vancouver planners institutionalized a technology of density to defend against the overcrowded slum, by then a global and feared scourge. Second, in the wake of urban renewal, a group of insurgent planners turned density from ‘bad’ to also ‘good’, and a metaphor of densification was articulated to help propel an intensifying process of urban redevelopment. And third, in the early 2000s, a failed attempt to enshrine EcoDensity into the charter of the city nonetheless lives on in the spirit of city policy.

Chapter 2 is a case study of a particular affordable housing redevelopment. Less than a month after the 2021 rezoning passed City Council, the nonprofit housing provider Entre Nous Femme (ENF) informed tenants at Alma Blackwell—a 44-unit, mixed-used social housing complex it owns in East Vancouver—that the property would be demolished and rebuilt with double the stock. While density was a key catalyst and rationale for redevelopment, I argue that public divestment from the housing sector transformed both landlord and tenants alike, and between them was deployed contested visions of ‘community’ to justify and resist redevelopment.

Chapter 3 is a history of the demoviction, a portmanteau invented by tenants in the neighboring city of Burnaby and used by Alma Blackwell tenants to contest redevelopment. I argue the concept works by foregrounding the byproducts of redevelopment—the evicted tenant and the demolished building.

## **Lay Summary**

Vancouver has experienced a housing affordability crisis, on and off, for over a century. Today, in the wake of decades of neoliberal disinvestment, an often harked upon solution is to build more housing. Certainly, increasing the housing supply is important. But such a narrow focus on supply risks obscuring the layers of complexity underpinning the situation. Focusing on a few keywords in city's housing discourse—density, community, demoviction—I close read the language used by planners, officials, landlords and tenants to justify and contest the redevelopment of the city.

## **Preface**

This thesis is an intellectual work by the author, Jordan Amron. Fieldwork reported in Chapters 2 and 3 (interviews and ethnographic data) were collected by Jordan Amron and covered by UBC's Behavioral Research Ethics Board (certificate # H22-00002).

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I say it's surprising only because it would be dishonest if I didn't mention how lonely this project has too often felt. There were weeks on end in which I neglected the people above (along with myself), all of whom I care deeply for. And for that, I am sorry and grateful that you've let me stick around in your lives. Thank you all for your patient care, sharp critique, and trusting belief.



## **Chapter 1: The rise and revision of density**

On October 5th, 2022 at the Fairmont Hotel in downtown Vancouver, fifty-some well-dressed people watched five candidates for mayor debate the city's housing crisis. Online, the event, hosted by University of British Columbia's business school, had actually been billed as a "Discussion of Housing and Real Estate *Issues*" (\$15/students). The sense that these issues amounted to a 'crisis' seemed distant on the stage. "Just as a reminder," began one of the two local journalists moderating, "this debate will be solely focused on Vancouver's number one favorite topic to complain about, talk about, moan about, and that's housing and real estate" (Sauder et al. 2022).

The sentiment of the journalist—a certain jaded detachment—was also expressed by some of the candidates. For an hour on stage, they spoke with the confidence one might expect of politicians. But behind the combative rhetoric was actually an underlying narrow policy spectrum; minding particular differences, there was general agreement that the cause of the crisis was a shortage of housing and thus the needed solution an increase in supply. And in between the overconfident horse-jockeying were cracks in the conversation; often, these were cracks of laughter in the collective, like when a hypothetical was floated of another city looking to the future mayor of Vancouver for housing policy advice.

Much of this ambivalence came together in a climactic moment (after an intermission of appetizers and beverages) during what moderators dubbed the "money round, the fun round" (candidates asked each other questions directly). Ken Sim, who would go on to win the mayoral race easily, challenged then-incumbent Kennedy Stewart on the topic of development permitting. Six to eight years, Sim jabbed, was way too long for a developer big or small to secure the

laundry list of paperwork required to legally break ground. “Why was permitting so slow in the city?” Sim asked. Stewart responded with an air of incredulity:

This debate is amazing, I think, because it has all come down to permitting, but what we actually need is a housing plan to move forward with...The stat that I go by is the vacancy rate, which is down to nothing. And so we have to build much more housing, *more density*, and you're just scared to talk about it. You will not give any targets, you never have...[P]ermitting is one half, approval is the other half. And approvals are what's important here.

In classic political maneuvering, Stewart then turned the question back on Sim, and pressed him to “give us a number,” a concrete target of units he planned to build. Sim deflected, questioning Stewart’s ability to hit his own targets. “How are these units going to get built if you still have to wait six to ten years to approve them?” he repeated. And from there, coherence devolved into a restrained bawl of political jabberwocky. Until, suddenly, a third candidate—Mark Marissen from the centrist Progress Vancouver party—interrupted the interrupting voices: “*It’s a gimmick. All of it.*”

For a second, an uneasy silence took hold of the room. Then it was gone, replaced almost simultaneously by a laughter that moved from candidates to audiences, and an interjection by the moderator:

All right. We’re gonna wrap it up there on that note. Everybody please take a deep breath. We know that your blood is boiling a little bit after that exchange. But I do think we showed voters where you stand on a lot of important issues through that discussion.

The journalist-moderator then tried to transition to the next round, but was interrupted by her colleague, who in an undertone reminded her that Stewart still hadn’t had a turn to ask his own question. A harmless performative mistake, yet notably her only one of the night. The fluster of her *own* “boiling blood” perhaps? We’ll return to this curious ‘gimmick’, and the un-languaged affect of distance and discomfort that took over the room. First, something more basic about the frame of this housing discourse: Together, the two leading candidates articulate the housing

problem as made up of two components, “half” permitting, “half” approval. And though the two disagree as to where the emphasis is, the binary comes together in the smooth and confident synthesis of “more housing, more density”—a solution explicitly articulated by Stewart, but shared by Sim, Marissen, and at least in a general sense, all the candidates on the stage. The housing crisis, then, is boiled down in this debate into a question of ‘bad governance’—as if economic and immigration policy (just to name two other ‘halves’) are outside or peripheral within the political landscape of a municipal election.

A year of attention to housing in Vancouver had stuck the word in my ear. Density was in the plans, laws, and newspapers; at neighborhood meetings, potluck dinners, and chance encounters with strangers. It was at the affordable housing complex on the East side where I was doing fieldwork, in the justification for redevelopment argued by the nonprofit provider and its hired private consultants. Density has recently been touted by scholars and planners alike as the central index of the city, as the essence of urbanity. And it is deployed by cities all over the world with intense confidence. As Nikolai Roskamm writes, “When we think about what makes a city a city or what makes society a society...there is always talk of ‘density’.” (translated and quoted in Keil 2020: 1285).

But if there has *always* been density talk, what the term has meant has changed dramatically over the last century. To 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Vancouver settlers, Stewart’s call for “more density” would have been disagreeable, if not surprising or even shocking. Through the 1950s and the end of urban renewal, high density was metonymized in the slum, which itself was understood by many as the city’s chief problem. In this chapter, I offer a wide panorama of density in Vancouver over the long 20<sup>th</sup> century. What to make of the concept’s

remarkable flip from ‘bad’ to ‘good’? And why has “more density” become entrenched as a dominant register through which the solution to the (crisis of the) city is envisioned?

Though its often framed as such, density is understood here as neither inherently bad nor good. Density is a tool that is wielded by different groups in different, often contradictory ways. Two basic ways I trace in this chapter are: (1) As a metaphor—to articulate a general, abstracted vision of urban development; and (2) as a technology—to enact a particular concrete vision of urban development (via zoning). These two kinds of density—metaphorical and technological—are not mutually exclusive, but often manifest simultaneously, as in Stewart’s slogan “more housing, more density.”

The distinction then—between articulation of density within the housing discourse and implementation of density within the urban form—is more an analytical tool to help disaggregate a multiplicity of readings and uses at play, to better clarify the ways a particular form of development is made into understanding. Following the lead of recent geographic scholarship on density, I examine how “the politics of density is not only quantitative but both material and affective” too (Chen 2020: 1244).

There are three sections. First, at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I demonstrate how *a science of density* was institutionalized with a new town planning movement. Building on recent scholarship on Vancouver’s early planners like Thomas Adams, I argue that density was framed as a neutral technology of urban planning that synthesized a measurement of population and land, and people and floor space; and yet simultaneously, density was articulated through an extended moment of “slum panic,” which as the metonymized specter of the city, understood high levels of crowding as physical and moral hazards. Second, I look at the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and demonstrate how, in the wake of slum clearance and the neoliberal rollout,

planners began to transform density. I argue that beginning in the 1980s, on the heels of a qualitative “turn” from ‘bad’ to ‘good’ propelled by Jane Jacobs, a *metaphor of densification* also began to develop in Vancouver, re-forming density within a fresh rhetorical articulation of a general process of urban development. Despite the ostensible demolition of the slum from both the Western urban landscape and language belies the concept’s vital afterlife.

Finally, I bring these turns together in the mid 2000s, on the cusp of the Great Recession, when a conservative Non Partisan Association government attempted to make a new policy of EcoDensity the charter of Vancouver’s 21<sup>st</sup> century future. I demonstrate how this policy “aimed at making densification hegemonic,” as Rosol writes (2011: 2239), and argue the project revolved around contested logics of waste. On one side, planners and officials claimed increasing the density of the city would “improve the environment” by making it more liveable, affordable and sustainable. An uneasy bloc of single-family homeowners and housing activists countered by claiming the opposite: high density would degrade if not destroy the characters of their neighborhoods, and would be more a boon to the pockets of developers than renters. Density had not simply “turned” from bad to good, as some scholars have argued (Roskaam 2014: 89), but still contained its original signification and resonance with the overcrowded slum. The bloc used this specter of wasteful and wasted space effectively within the discursive fodder of their counter-arguments to dispel the explicit rechartering of the city as EcoDensity. Indeed, despite its explicit failure for policy hegemony, the technology and metaphor of density has continued to move into the center of Vancouver’s housing discourse, propelled in no small part by the slum and its specter of waste. How do these “involutioned” movements—from bad to *also* good, from technology to *also* metaphor—work to (in)cohere and (in)intensify Vancouver’s contradiction-riddled housing crisis?

Indeed, to return to the affect in the room at the Fairmont—shared unevenly between moderators, candidates, and audience—it seems to have grown from a local reaction to a collective sense of the entrenchment and exacerbation of the city’s housing problem. Rents in Metro Vancouver top all cities in the country. Evictions rates do the same. The homeless population remains around the highest ever recorded. And the city’s opioid epidemic has killed more people in British Columbia since 2019 than the coronavirus pandemic. Many a government has come and gone, and the crisis has only gotten worse. Indeed, the first formal mention of a “housing crisis” in Vancouver had come just over a century earlier. Could this new crop of politicians actually solve the problem? Is a particular story of housing language at work. What has changed? And what has remained the same?

### **1.1 Density rising: Through the slum and scientific town planning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century**

On October 7th, 1919— a century and change before the mayoral debate at the Fairmont Hotel —former government officials from across the province converged on Vancouver’s north shore for the 16th convention of British Columbia municipalities. On site to give the opening address was “His Excellency, the (9th) Duke of Devonshire, Governor-General of Canada”—a “former mayor of two towns” Victor Cavendish, who according to exclusive write ups on his visit and speech, was greeted with much cheer and applause (*The Province* 1919a: 18). In the *Vancouver Daily World*, the headline read:

Keep Canada Free of  
Slums, Duke’s Advice  
To Municipal Chiefs

In the subhead, perhaps the first time in the city's young history, readers encountered the phrase 'Housing Crisis'.<sup>1</sup> "Beware of Slums" read the first subsection after that.

Slum Crisis Slum. What to make of the way that Cavendish and the applauding crowd were seeing the city environment? And how does this vision relate to an early form of density? For one, the slum was an already-established international phenomenon that had yet to land in Vancouver. Feared and fascinated over, it had until the 1820s, been better known as a rookery—metaphorical slang that invoked the cramped, haphazard, noisy nesting habits of the rook—a certain crow which had been officially classified vermin since the early 16th century because of its skill stealing grain from farmers' fields. The slum was the hub of disease, crime and vice and thus a threat to the imaginary of the modern city, and with it the prosperity of the nation.

It follows that in Vancouver, the first explicit mention of 'housing crisis' in the city seems to have crystallized as *a warning* from the imperial core, with the slum as its chief object. Since the city's incorporation in 1886, Vancouver settlers had been reading anxious and dramatic exposes about slum life; as well as newspaper reports of slum clearance—first in England, then across much of Western Europe and onto the United States and then Eastern Canada. (For reference, Engels published "The Housing Question" in 1842; and Dickens *Oliver Twist* in 1837.) To early settlers, the object of the slum was experienced predominantly as a traveling discursive phenomenon that was feared and fascinated over, and crucially, far away but getting closer—a looming specter, if you will. "We have no slums at present," argued an editorial in the *Daily World* two days after the Duke's speech. "But shall we be able to say the same twenty

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<sup>1</sup> The full subhead reads: "Governor General, as Former Mayor of Two English Towns Addresses Opening Session of Municipal Convention—Housing Crisis, Inadequate Municipal Revenue and P.G.E Land Taxes Mentioned"

years hence. Now is surely the time to learn from other cities' mistakes" (*Vancouver Daily World* 1919a: 4).

Yet, if the specter of the slum had yet to arrive in substance, it was at the same time clear to many that "the conditions which go to make [it] were already present" in Vancouver; "We have foreign quarters in our cities where sanitation is often times honored only in the ignoring it," the editorial concluded (Ibid. 4). Indeed, as Jill Wade documents, the City had been trying and failing to regulate slum conditions since at least the 1890s by targeting unlicensed housing in multiple areas: along the waterfront (between False Creek and Pender Street), the huts of unemployed Chinese railroad workers were demolished, rebuilt, demolished again, and then again; floathouses and shacks where Italian and other immigrants and squatters lived met similar fates. And this housing problem was not just on the city's outskirts: as early as 1912, the health department had deemed some lodging houses "a great menace to the public health"—a charged scientific turn of phrase, which after the formal end of lodging housing, would begin to hold the slum as its subject (Wade 1994: 17).

It is through these slum conditions that an early form of density was articulated in the city. If sanitation was the broad mandate of the Victorian public health regime, the particular conditions understood to compose a slum were elemental: inadequate light, air, and space. And it was this last spatial element—typically articulated as "overcrowding"—that was understood by reformers as more fundamental than the others. According to two reports prepared in the early 1920s by Vancouver's medical health officer, "overcrowding particularly" was emphasized as affecting rental housing in the West End and Downtown business district (Wade 1994). As famous urban reformer Jacob Riis put it bluntly, "[G]iven the crowd, you have the slum ready-made" (Riis 1902: 1).



The discursive distinction between slum *conditions* and slum *object* is important because it meant a certain feared future was still seen as preventable. Conditions had seemingly yet to congeal into object —essence had yet to find its substance. And this (temporal) distinction was politically useful for the dominant solution which had been percolating in the city and across much of the Western world since the turn of the century: scientific town-planning.<sup>2</sup> It's here—with early modern planners and their new tool of “comprehensive zoning”—in which we can begin to see clearly the historical conditions through which density was worked.

For Thomas Adams, arguably the most famous early Canadian planner, urban planning would save Canada from much more than slums: “the *chief object* of planning,” he presumably wrote in an anonymous 1918 article in the planning journal *Conservation of Life* (a year before the Duke's warning), “is to save the money and health of the citizens which is now being wasted”; planning was to “prevent waste in what we have” and “develop for future growth” (quoted in Blomley 2017: 356). Two months after the Duke's warning, with the global specter of the overcrowded slum looming, Adams issued the first statement promoting the adoption of a new zoning act.

One of the main objects (of town planning) is what is called Zoning which is concerned with the control of the use, height, and density of the buildings on the land, and there is nothing which is so vitally important in the interest of health, convenience, and amenity (*Vancouver Sun* 1919a: 9).

Zoning, the next paragraph goes on, was already being adopted across American cities (“*even* New York”) in order to “prevent the destruction of light and air by uncontrollable building

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<sup>2</sup> Though city planning has certainly existed dating back to the very first cities, scientific planning, now typically and from here on referred to as urban planning specifies a particularly *modern* kind that arose in 19<sup>th</sup> century England, and which was then exported and transformed around the world. In Canada, British Columbia was the first province to formally adopt a planning statute in 1925.

operations and to stabilize real estate values” (Ibid. 9). Canadian cities should get on the bandwagon, Adams implored.

There are two new ideas in this carefully and concisely crafted statement that Adams helped introduce to many Canadians for perhaps the first time. First, “What is called *Zoning*” (my emphasis) is introduced and then defined through an old and intuitive causal chain of circulation. Light, air, and property need to be protected from “destruction” (so the stagnant ‘cancerous’ slum could not be allowed to settle in). And second, *density*, as a chief component of zoning, requires a partial specification as “of the buildings on the land,” but from there it can seemingly be intuited; indeed, density’s numerical threshold called Floor Area Ratio (FAR) wasn’t explicitly formalized within zoning law until the 1960s. At the start then of a new scientific town planning movement in Vancouver, we can see how an intuitive understanding of urban density was attained through a sort of disciplinary transmutation: density had been ‘discovered’ in the natural sciences to measure the elements of the chemical world and was now being enrolled by scientific planners to measure the elements of the urban world. The rhetorical authority of zoning was rooted in an implicit, intuitive resonance with chemical laws that could stave off the slum and solve the elemental forces underpinning the housing crisis by giving, as Adams emphasized, “stability to real estate values” (Ibid. 9).

Indeed, as Adams’s emphasis on “amenity” alludes, from the very beginning the naturalizing aura of density which planners sought to invoke was entangled with the institution of private property. Indeed, already back in 1912, the relationship between density and property was being drawn out. In a full two page spread titled “THE VALUE OF VANCOUVER’S REAL ESTATE,” the lede table offers a list of West Coast American cities plus Vancouver, along with their size and population, and then computed from the two, their population density.

*Why Property in Vancouver Is Valuable*

	Area, Square Miles.	Population, Census 1910.	Population Density, Per Square Mile.
Vancouver . . . . .	14	100,000	7143
Seattle . . . . .	50	237,000	4740
Tacoma . . . . .	40	83,000	2075
Spokane . . . . .	37	104,000	2810
Portland, Ore. . . . .	50	207,000	4140
Los Angeles . . . . .	92	319,000	3468
San Francisco . . . . .	46	416,000	9044

Figure 1.1 A table from a 1912 article in *The Province* attempting to draw a connection between property value and population density.

The table was followed with this confident explanation:

Consideration of this statistical table *instantly makes it plain* that the price of real estate (sic) in Vancouver is governed *entirely* by the laws of supply and demand. The more people resident within a given area, the greater the demand for accommodation, with consequent competition for property and advancing values (*The Province* 1912, emphasis mine).

Here is the swift and sweeping claim again (as if the absent key data on property value is a given). Notable is the rhetorical weaving of population density with the law of supply and demand. A table of density “instantly make(s) it plain” that property value is “governed entirely” by the power of the economic law of supply and demand—a law taken here as natural as that of gravity. Thus, the proper control of density early on was understood not *only* as a solution to the looming sanitation and health crisis in Vancouver, but also to the imperative to increase property value.

Like the problem of the slum itself, the solution of modern planning (as its now called) traveled to Canada both from England, where early Canadian planners had grown up in the wake of the first wave of clearance in the 1870s, and from the United States, where in New York City specifically, it had first been institutionalized as a way to manage the development of towering skyscrapers and overcrowded tenements. Though it wouldn't be wrong to explain the rise of comprehensive zoning as an upper-class reaction to the deteriorating "social ills" of an industrializing urban landscape—chief among them overcrowding—such an explanation would also be incomplete. As Valverde argues through a case study of New York City's 1916 ordinance, zoning was propelled by more than distaste and revilement of needle trade workers on Fifth Avenue. The ordinance, at least according to Valverde, was a "polysemic legal invention," designed to "manage the intra-bourgeois conflict between the expansiveness of capitalist commerce on the one hand and the cultural preference for class-homogeneous residential districts, on the other" (Valverde 2011: 302). Zoning sought to protect a powerful association of Fifth Avenue merchants and real estate moguls from the "encroaching garment industry on the teeming side-streets" (Willis 1986: 47).

In a legal history of the 1916 New York City zoning ordinance, Keith Revell points out that, while the ordinance did place some controls over height and use into the hands of city officials, these controls were careful not to challenge the established patterns of development. Edward Bassett, the lawyer and politician who designed the ordinance, understood that a fledgling bloc of planners, along with their allied engineers, architects, and public health experts stood no chance in the face of Fifth Avenue and Wall Street. Real estate interests would need to be brought into the fold if comprehensive zoning, and the modern planning movement, had a shot to gain a foothold. "The ordinance stabilized those patterns, giving official sanction and

legal protection to the status quo” (Revell 1992: 19). And so they were. Real estate and financial institutions worked directly with the city to develop the 1916 ordinance. They themselves came to see in the law a convenient “way to protect private property” by legally sanctioning business (Ibid. 20). Without challenging building heights, skyscraper owners and big merchants especially saw in the ordinance a legal cudgel against some of their smaller fish competition by limiting what they argued was a housing “oversupply” problem (Barr 2019).

And yet as planning got off its feet, the slum continued its approach in the anxious eyes of Vancouver settlers. If in 1919, slums were still a worried 20 years away, a 1927 headline (*The Province* 1919: 30) quoted the city’s chief architect, A.J Bird, who “Says Vancouver is Getting Slums.” And by 1939, a doctor speaking at a provincial medical convention made sense of a recent trip to Europe and the US concluding that “[t]he slums of Vancouver were as bad as the slums of any part of America” (*Times Colonist* 1939: 11). Yet, the slum’s temporal approach shouldn’t be construed as smooth and steady discursive movement. For instance, also in 1939, the reformer Raymond Unwin said Vancouver “was *not* a city of slums, but some of its parts did suffer from ‘slum dwellings and conditions of overcrowding and bad sanitation’” (Wade 1997: 19). Indeed, consensus making about whether there were slums was a fundamentally contentious, non-linear process in Vancouver. Indeed, midway through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of high density itself was turned inside out.

## **1.2 Density conjugating: Jane Jacobs, illegal suites, and making densification in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**

If the specter of the slum had been looming in Vancouver since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, its dense overcrowded conditions had, at least according to officials and planners, congealed into an

object by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In response, Canadian planners, piggybacking off their American counterparts (and harkening back to their 19<sup>th</sup> century English predecessors), made slum clearance and freeway construction the primary one-two step of urban reform. And in the wake of clearance, as the dust settled and its impacts began to be understood, density itself turned. How to explain this turn?

One key touchstone for the density turn can be traced to Jane Jacobs, who marked a “watershed” moment in urban planning by turning density good. “To say that cities need high dwelling densities...as I am saying they do, is conventionally regarded as lower than taking sides with a man-eating shark (Jacobs 1961: 218). In a fascinating history of this “density turn,” Nikolai Roskaam close reads *The Death and Life of American Cities* to show how Jacob’s rhetoric and argument worked to penetrate the stigma of high density and turn it on its face.

Our difficulty is no longer how to contain people densely in metropolitan areas and avoid the ravages of disease, bad sanitation, and child labor. To go on thinking in these terms is anachronistic. Our difficulty today is rather how to contain people in metropolitan areas and avoid the ravages of apathetic and helpless neighborhoods

With a new Fordist economy buzzing, Jacobs argued that the modern city had solved the bad problems of the industrializing city: overcrowding, disease, and pollution were no more the central concern. Now more local social conditions were the problem, which Jacobs articulates with a practical metaphor. “Proper densities,” she argues are “a matter of performance,” which she likened to a well-fed body. “We ought to look at densities in much the same way as we look at calories and vitamins. Right amounts are right amounts because of how they perform. And what is right differs in specific instances” (Jacobs 1961: 209). Right densities, in other words, are not the same as high densities.

In Vancouver, the most infamous example of slum clearance was in Hogan’s Alley. The historic black neighborhood, along with Chinatown, fell inside UBC sociologist Leonard

Marsh's "collar of blight," a term he coined in 1950 to legitimize the redevelopment of the entire East End (Marsh 1950). Blight worked to naturalize poverty, turn it contagious, and orient public anxiety around the eradication of its infectious threat. It became the "primary justification" for urban renewal because it so effectively hid the underlying motives and biases of planners. Because it offered them a powerful empty signifier to re-territorialize an entire area as wasted and in need, not rehabilitation or retrofitting, but bulldozer renewal. As Rachel Weber points out, property in its empty state, "devoid of improvement," is ironically "more recognizable to the abstracting, utilitarian logic of capital markets" (Weber 2002: 530). By one estimate, one million people including those in Hogan's Alley, were evicted in the name of fighting blight (Hall 1996).

But it would be an over-simplification to explain the density turn through some Great Woman Theory of Jacobs, who it should be emphasized, held complex and nuanced views surrounding urbanization, and was very much against bulldozer clearance practices, like those that befell Hogan's Alley.<sup>3</sup> Nor would it be accurate to characterize this turn as a smooth, linear flip from bad to good as a top-down process of technocratic planning power. Indeed, one of the key contradictions of the density turn is that, at least in Canada, it was also catalyzed by the way the policy of slum clearance spread north from the United States sweeping destruction of slum clearance itself, and the backlash that it invoked from those it impacted.

What will extreme localized density give us? By turning its eyes south, Canada is in the fortunate position of having access to a time machine with which she can view the future. New York, Chicago, and Detroit...urban blight, ghettos, congestion, alienation, and all other forms of social pathology, assault, robbery, rape, and murder. The correlation

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<sup>3</sup> It should be emphasized, upfront that Jacobs's reformulation of density wasn't a blanket celebration of the concept, but rather one aimed in particular towards a critique single-use zoning and high-rise architecture (as developed in New York City in the wake of 1916 zoning ordinance, for instance). "Considering the hazard of monotony...the most serious fault in our zoning laws lies in the fact that they permit an entire area to be devoted to a single use" (1961: 229). My intention with grounding the density turn with Jacobs is less about critiquing her vision than it is about pinpointing the rhetorical work that was done to transform the concept.

between an increasing crime rate and population density is well known (*Vancouver Sun* Feb 20, 1971: 6).

Indeed, as we've seen already with the travel of the slum itself, in the contextually youthful Vancouver, the temporal delay that marked the spread of renewal policy from its origin sites in the United States is critical to understanding how policy shifts around density were understood and debated in the city.

By the mid 1960s, as plans for a freeway through the heart of Vancouver were beginning to be articulated, an understanding had already begun to emerge about the devastating impact of freeway development on cities in the United States. And while Jacobs's work was undeniably significant in shaping this critique of urban renewal, according to Roskamm, this new understanding that was emerging of high density as good was "less the outcome of the theoretical debate within the discipline and more of local resistance against urban planning practices" (Roskamm 2017). A former resident of Hogan's Alley likened Marsh and Vancouver planners to a group of missionaries attempting to convert their community into a high-density area:

When we heard of city council's plans for the neighbourhood, we were horrified, we just screamed. They intended to put high-rises all over here, like the West End. But the people that lived here, we just took up a petition. We got thousands and thousands of names. And we stopped them...The whole neighbourhood got involved. Because we were satisfied with our neighborhood. But the people from outside came in, and told us we shouldn't have these houses, *we should live in housing projects, we should live in high-rises*. But what was wrong with living here? They didn't live here, I don't know what they were so worried about...It's just like the Christians going to Africa, trying to convert you to Christianity when you already have your own tribal laws and religions and everything else. And that was their attitude when they came down here. They interviewed every individual and they had all kinds of books. (Marlatt & Itter, 1979:173–74, quoted in Allen 2002: 40)

In fact, in flipping density on its face, Roskamm argues that Jacobs actually adheres to urban planning orthodoxy. She distinguishes between familiar categories like "healthiest" and



“unhealthiest” areas and holds up (exemplary) “examples” next to “failures.” That is, by reproducing the Good/Bad binary and merely shifting the elements in the two buckets, Jacobs “preserves density as a category for urban planning.” What changed then was that it “became possible to swap the position ‘high density is evil’ with the position ‘density is urbanity’ (Roskamm 2017: 90).

Another way to trace the density turn is through the word’s conjugation over the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century into ‘densification’. Perhaps the first usage of the term in the local newspapers came in a 1952 editorial supporting a proposal that Indian reserve land “should be developed into beautiful public parkland” rather than a “factory zone.”

Of course we are aware that there may be a shortage of industrial land on the lower mainland, but the crisis is not necessarily now. When the time of ultimate shortage comes, the solution may be satellite town development rather than the densification and spoliation of Vancouver (*Vancouver Sun* 1952: 4)

The addition of the latin suffix *-tion* reformed density into an abstract noun expressing a state of action. No longer was density predominantly, if not exclusively a seemingly neutral *technology of planning*, one that, as introduced to Canadians by Thomas Adams some forty years prior, could be ostensibly used to regulate particular zoning policy towards either higher or lower densities. Through a process of abstraction, density was increasingly now also seen as a way to articulate *the general process of urban development*; and critically, a general process that tended to move naturally in a linear direction of intensification.

To be clear, densification is a clunky, minor conjugation that, even as its usage grew amongst planners through the turn of the century, never came close to superseding its simpler root form. This perhaps makes sense considering its etymological transmutation into urban discourse from the material sciences, via specialized industrial densification technologies that were being invented. But the explicit abstraction (and lack of its explicit inverse in the discourse)

points to a movement nonetheless crystallized a way the city was increasingly seen as a place where density was increasing. Politically, then, density became a key concept to understand and engage with a particular form of urban transformation.

‘Densification’ officially moved into the center of Vancouver housing discourse in the 1980s and 90s, as population growth became an increasing concern amongst city officials. In the press, the word was derided for years.

For several years now the city council and city planners have been talking about *something they insist on calling* ‘densification’. What they mean is that since Vancouver is an attractive city, and people like to work and live here, we can expect that over the next decade or two, *we will need* considerably more housing in the downtown area (*Vancouver Sun* 1983, emphasis mine).

Though the journalist above is matter-of-fact that new housing needed “will” go in the downtown area, what exactly was meant by densification was highly contested. In the press, critique wasn’t below targeting the clunky, pun-prone sound of the word itself. A “big...lovely bureaucratic word” (*Vancouver Sun* 1987)—“[s]ince **density** means stupidity, what Vancouver is really saying is: ‘how dumb can we really get?’” (*The Province* 1988). A report of a 1981 city council meeting was cheekily titled “There was a lot of densification going round...” and made sure to point out parenthetically that “densification is not a word.” But the word stuck around nonetheless. By 1990, an article titled “Population growth challenges planners,” touted densification as perhaps the “buzzword of the 1990s” (*Vancouver Sun* 1990).

More substantive critique of densification, while questioning the heterogeneous ambiguity of the term’s meaning, also accepted as a given a certain inevitability of its force. “Townhouses were densification. Too many office buildings were densification. Duplexes were densification. Vancouver was running out of room” (*Vancouver Sun* 1990). Indeed, simultaneously as density was abstracted and naturalized into a general force of development,

this force was contested on the ground through the possibilities of particular forms. Specifically, the debate in the 1980s honed in on the legality of secondary suites (or basement suites), which today are estimated to make up 50% of the Vancouver's housing stock (Jones 2023). At a housing seminar for Vancouver residents in 1981, a University of British Columbia architect named Ron Walkey described the development of illegal suites in response to housing needs as “the natural process of densification” and suggested, as paraphrased by the journalist, that new zoning should be implemented to allow homeowners to build “garden cottages” in their backyards, which anyway were “no more than weedy wastelands used to park rusting vehicles” (*Vancouver Sun* 1981).

In the face of a new positive densification regime proposed to significantly up-zone neighborhoods, as planners attempted with condos in Hogan's Alley, a broader and “gentle[r]” densification program was articulated to formalize secondary suites and garden cottages beginning in the 1980s. This was a strategic compromise between homeowners, planners, and officials. Indeed, rather than resisting densification tout court in the face of full-scale slum clearance, as many Black and Chinese residents attempted through the 1960s, beginning in the 1980s an implicitly majority white constituency of homeowners in Vancouver's core suburban neighborhoods faced a top-down densification regime that was gentler, and less scorched earth. In fact, for over a century city officials, homeowners, and eventually modern planners (in an uneasy bloc) had managed to by and large keep densification out of their own neighborhoods, and focused instead in the downtown core. And discursively at least, it was through intuitive imperatives like the journalist's above—that the city “will need” more densification, and of course it should be concentrated downtown—that such a policy was in part propelled.

The 1980s conservative solution of “gentle” or “planned” densification was articulated by the Non-Partisan Party with a tense ambivalence. Simultaneously, NPA leaders espoused a politics of trickle-down housing privatization, (what planners called “filtering”). Yet they couldn’t afford to alienate their voter base of homeowners who “consistently resisted” densification because they “wanted their neighborhoods to remain as they were” (Rosol 2013: 2244; also see McAfee 1997). This ambivalence, then, was (and continues to be) produced through a contradiction of private property: the single-family homeowner has an interest in both increasing their property value and preserving their neighborhood character. While I touch more on this ambivalent relationship in the next chapter, here it’s enough to say that its essential contradiction—between accumulation and preservation—has intensified over the past few decades (perhaps most clearly seen in the rise and polarization of YIMBY/NIMBY discourse into narrow and sedimented political identities).

A more general point about discourse to scale this little history is that densification wasn’t merely a creative turn of phrase that just so happened to appear in the 1980s, but one articulated as a new and intensifying regime of neoliberal capital accumulation was rolling out. That is, the metaphor of density—its rhetorical abstraction into a “natural” general process of urban development—was simultaneously articulated into a *particular* development discourse around the legality of secondary suites (and subsequently laneway houses). By 1993, the Canadian federal followed by the BC provincial governments had completely divested from new public housing development. The rise of illegal suites can be seen, in part then, as private homeowners capitalizing creatively on a general expansion of economic privatization, including in the housing sector, where an austerity-induced shortage of housing and rise in property values

was being capitalized upon—turning a growing segment of small homeowners into petty landlords.

Indeed, that Vancouver homeowners were willing to literally break the law to take advantage of their ballooning property value is telling: not of risky or bold behavior—less of any internal character quality; and more of their relationship to planners and city hall—and between them a certain character of private property itself as it works with the legal and rhetorical technologies of zoning and density. Homeowners assessed the risk between law breaking and enforcement as low, tested the waters accordingly, and were proven right. Through to the early 2000s, the city’s solution (or non-solution) was to maintain the informality of illegal secondary suites as formal policy. This approach appeased homeowners and the city’s own housing mandate, and “provides a striking illustration of the argument that informality is produced by the state through the selective enforcement of a system of laws and regulation” (Mendez and Quastel 2016: 1156).

The informality, in this case, was produced not only by the state, but state and citizen together; and in particular, citizen in its pre-eminent, originary form: as property-holder. This ambivalent solution—to formalize rather than prosecute the illegality—demonstrates the way the interests of planners and homeowners synergized into a compromise of “gentle” “planned” densification; and more, that homeowners understood a fundamental tendency of zoning technology: its willingness to make exceptions. As Marianne Valverde argues, early zoning law was introduced with an appeals board, which held a powerful exception-granting mechanism. This structure provided property owners with a “safety valve” to go around the ordinance when they needed. Valverde argues these exceptions and exemptions were “[a] key reason—arguably the key reason” why comprehensive zoning was accepted and successful across the country;

otherwise, municipalities would have likely been inundated with legal challenges by property owners (Valverde 2011: 289).

Few if any other areas of law have as a central mechanism anything analogous to the curious planning category of ‘legal nonconforming use’—the category that installs exceptionality, indeed illegality, at the very heart of modernist planning law...Zoning, then, and land use thinking more generally, does not have a political essence. Seeing the earth as a collection of land uses is a knowledge practice that is compatible with a variety of political projects” (Ibid. 291)

Likewise, might we say density has no political essence? Is seeing the earth as a collection of densities also a knowledge practice with political multiplicity? I don’t see why not. A policy of densification can be advocated by a variety of political groups, whether that be a bloc of petty landlords and big developers intending to capitalize on their private property’s potential land lift, or a bloc of renters and activists hoping to publicize and de-commodify the city’s housing stock. Which brings us to the final and climactic act: EcoDensity—when a conservative government tried to frame density as the explicit center of its political vision for Vancouver’s future and, in the face of an opposing bloc of homeowners and renters, failed.

### **1.3 Density metonymizing: The failure and afterlife of EcoDensity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

In 2006, then NPA mayor Sam Sullivan announced a new charter for the city of Vancouver: EcoDensity called for “high quality densification that uses resources more effectively and reduces waste.” Sullivan and his cabinet of planners argued the new policy was a win-win-win that would improve “livability, affordability, and sustainability” by concentrating the city’s form. “*We know* that high density living is actually really good for the environment,” Sullivan said (quoted in Rosol 2011). “*I would like us* to decide,” he said, “that densification is official city policy.”

EcoDensity marked a climactic attempt to make the metaphor of density (and with it the technology) the metonym of “urbanity itself” (Roskamm 2017). The confidence of the mayor’s royal “we know”—its invocation of a collective way of seeing high density as good—was undergirded by five decades of contested urbanization since *The Death and Life*, and the rise of the New Urbanism, which pedestaled a Jacobean vision of a dense and healthy city. But this confidence also belies density’s much more contested history in Vancouver; it attempts, overconfidently, to pre-empt and sweep away any question or reservation before it might be spoken. It is the political language of a play for hegemony—of claiming something contested as common sense.

And as we’ve seen, this particular play again used the “improvement” of “waste” as its central empiric. But unlike in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the wasted elements articulated now in the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> were not light, air, (over)crowding, or even real estate; nor were the wasted objects in need of improvement where these elements coalesced. The slum, blight, brownfields, or sanitation. The wastes EcoDensity would improve were higher abstractions—liveability, affordability, and sustainability. Together, this trinity target particular social, economic, and ecological inefficiencies and excesses within the urban environment. Indeed, if you look in the local newspapers from 2006-2008 while EcoDensity was the frontpage story, the “environment” can be seen like a sun around which the policy debate orbited.

“With EcoDensity we are protecting our environment by stopping sprawl and advancing green building standards” (*Vancouver Sun* 2007a). “It is about not only calming local traffic, but about reducing automobile traffic overall as part of reducing our impact on the environment” (Ibid. 2007b). But Sullivan’s confident invocation that EcoDensity was “really good for the environment” was contested. “Who really stands to gain in this rush to overdevelop the city?

Certainly not the people...and certainly not the environment,” wrote a Coquitlam resident in a letter to the editor (Ibid. 2008a). “I believe that tearing down old homes to build super-sized houses harms not only the physical environment but also its sense of community,” wrote a local carpenter in an op-ed, “And the practice certainly does not address the city’s goal of EcoDensity” (Ibid. 2008b). The “environment” was invoked as a catch-all abstraction through which both proponents and opponents of EcoDensity made their arguments, which made the government’s royal stance of “we know” seem inflated.

Indeed, Sullivan’s NPA seem to have over-played and -simplified the height of the Jacobean pedestal they had helped fashioned for densification. According to research by the geographer Morit Rosol, many residents saw more of a ploy than a policy: EcoDensity “*deceptively* sells densification for profit as livability, sustainability, and affordability,” as one Vancouver resident put it. An anonymous former director of planning admitted as much in 2008: “By putting the *dirty* word of density with the very sweet and tasty word of Eco, you launder the dirty word” (Rosol 2012: 2243). EcoDensity was a new container for “basically continuing existing policies” begun over the previous three decades—an empty signifier, a new enclosure for density’s contradictions (Ibid. 2241).

And yet, despite the confident attempt to paper over density’s contradictions by greenwashing its early history as “man eating shark”—the dirtiness of its original signifier remained prevalent and unresolved. Though the slum was not often invoked explicitly, its specter loomed clear and close. “The phrase,” according to an op-ed by a real estate developer...immediately engenders fear among many. Ironically, the main thrust of the EcoDensity initiative is aimed at addressing the same issues that create that fear” (*Vancouver Sun* 2007c). Specifically, the fear was of “crowding, without amenities” (*Vancouver Sun* 2008c).



“EcoDensity is a euphemism for overcrowding,” as a West Vancouver homeowner put it in a Letter to the Editor (*Vancouver Sun* 2008d). The historical flip is remarkable: scientific town planning, a movement which initially pitched itself as the solution to the overcrowded slum, was now a century later being accused of re-creating those very same conditions.

How, then, to account for EcoDensity’s explicit failure? As Rosol argues the opposition effectively targeted the content and process of the plan with substantive critiques that “challenged chains of equivalence between EcoDensity, sustainability, affordability and livability.” Specifically, homeowners re-enrolled the spectre of the wasted and menacing slum to contest the universal claim that high density is simply “good.” Indeed, the single-family homeowner had not magically disappeared in 2006; nor had their general position on high density shifted since top-down “densification” pressure had begun to significantly increase in the 1980s. From a higher viewpoint, single-family homeowners had proven remarkably successful at containing high densification initiatives within the downtown core and suburban satellite cities of the greater metropolitan area; within their own neighborhoods, proper densification was delimited as the “gentle” kind, and circumscribed within a discourse surrounding neighborhood ‘character’ and the formalization of secondary/basement suites and laneway houses, the latter of which found a protracted irresolution in 2009. As Mendez and Quastel argue, the rise of secondary and basement suites “allow neighbourhoods to retain the appearance of a single-family housing landscape while increasing residential density and providing additional low-cost rental housing” (2016: 1156). The overconfidence of Sullivan and his cabinet about their new shiny EcoDensity policy “seemed to disregard a city tradition whereby sustainability initiatives were achieved despite a fundamentally conservative residential population” (Quastel et al. 2012: 1071).

In late 2008, when a new Vision Vancouver government swept into power, EcoDensity was “quietly dropped” and “replaced with a robust” green economy vision, spearheaded by what the newly empowered liberal party called its “Greenest Capital Action Team” (Quastel et al. 2012: 1072). In its mission statement, titled “Vancouver 2020: A Bright Green Future,” the team re-emphasized the broadest vision of EcoDensity— “a compact, efficient city” but only as “a single element among the broader goals of eliminating dependence on fossil fuels.” EcoDensity was repackaged as a learning process in “community consultation”—reflecting in part what was learned from consultations—that “there needs to be ample community involvement in decision-making” (City of Vancouver 2010: 9) and that “addressing affordability is a key. Today, there would seem to be little reflection or echo of EcoDensity in the Vancouver housing discourse. It’s as if the Greenest Capital Action Team effectively filed the whole policy failure in a dusty corner of the municipal archives, and 15 years later it has for the most part been left alone or forgotten.

And yet, while policymakers and journalists make little mention of EcoDensity in their words these days, they continue to invoke and enact its substance with increasing confidence and frequency: “density” has trans-formed further into a conceptual hub of the housing discourse today, especially in the realms of electoral politics and the press, but also increasingly in the wider mainstream discourse. For instance, over the last few months in my own casual conversations with strangers when they would ask me that dreaded questions “What’s your thesis about?”, I began to deliberately avoid being the first to mention density by name, and noticed that Vancouverites more than others would bring density to the conversation anyway. In the wake of EcoDensity’s failure, instead of finding a new word altogether, density is now often invoked in passing rather than fixed on a pedestal—like in the former mayor’s slogan of “more housing, more density”; and instead of “eco” the concept is often qualified and played down by

its proponents as the “gentle” or “smart” kind, or gestured towards with a sense of ambivalence amongst the less self-assured and bespoke.

If planners and politicians (and Vancouverites more broadly) are to substantively challenge the roots of the city’s housing crisis—they would do well to better reflect on the contradictory history of the language in their own mouths and texts. Such a study would demand a sober analysis of their predecessors’ policy failures, and with it a wider and deeper understanding of *why* density has persisted and become instantiated in the discourse through and despite a century-plus of flaring housing crisis. Despite its notorious recent failure, the discursive durability of density—as both a way of seeing and solving the city through the measurement and control of space between land, floor, and people—speaks to a faithful predilection for the quantitative. Fixing the wastes of the urban environment—whether the elemental targets be air, light, and crowding or liveability, affordability, and sustainability—are conceived of via density as predominantly a matter of getting the amounts right. In other words, density talk today works to narrow the housing discourse onto a question of the supply and demand of units. And while building “more housing,” as former mayor Kennedy Stewart called for, is undeniably critical in the wake of decades of disinvestment and a now depleted and decaying housing stock, such a call seems to ignore or make peripheral the qualitative, messier relations of power at work.

In the next two chapters, I excavate some other important language that density is in conversation with in the Vancouver housing discourse. First, I offer a case study of a nonprofit affordable housing complex in East Vancouver that was recently upzoned and slated for redevelopment. Through interviews and archival research, I trace the history of the nonprofit’s transformation since its incorporation in the mid 1980s, and examine how the imperative to densify the housing complex is entangled with a contested idea ‘community’ articulated between

landlord and tenants. In Chapter 3, I trace the origins of particularly local and new piece of language—the demoviction—which was coined by British Columbia tenants to resist redevelopment. I consider how an ideology of density is insufficient to justify redevelopment, and how an ideology of obsolescence is increasingly enrolled to justify demolition

## **Chapter 2: The redevelopment of Alma Blackwell**

*What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.), [community] seems never to be used unfavorably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term” (Williams 1985: 76)*

*The webinar will begin shortly, please remain on the line.* Santana Mozgiel and her fiancé Mark Budd are sitting at their dining room table in front of a laptop in their East Vancouver apartment. If the inner walls were see-through, you could see dozens of tenants across the Alma Blackwell affordable housing complex in some shape of the same position. Budd clicks over to another tab, a private Facebook group for Alma Blackwell tenants. Another tenant has just written that she joined the webinar early and “watched them go through the deck n stuff — don’t think they knew I was there — I took screenshots 😊.” Budd replies: “I am recording.” Someone—or perhaps both Budd and Mozgiel together—takes a deep breath. *The broadcast is now starting. All attendees are in Listen Only Mode.*

So began the vaguely titled “Information Session” on the evening of April 29, 2021, in which tenants learned explicitly what many of them already suspected: the building was to be redeveloped, and they were to lose their homes. “Them” are five women now on screen: two work for Entre Nous Femme (ENF), the nonprofit housing provider that owns Alma Blackwell; and three for CitySpaces Consulting, a private planning and development firm hired by ENF to guide it through the technical and bureaucratic complexities of a redevelopment project today.

How did this happen? The proximate explanation is traceable to just nine days earlier, when Vancouver City Council considered a motion to “improve social housing” by rezoning two residential districts from four to six stories, including Alma Blackwell’s. The zoning change, city planners told council, would not only unlock federal funding to help redevelop over 100 “non-market,” “aging” properties; it would also help concentrate, and thus decarbonize, the city’s

energy-inefficient sub-urban form. In a win-win move, Vancouver could fight the housing and climate crises simultaneously. The amendment passed easily by the city council, without any votes in opposition.

Zoning, as I demonstrated in the previous chapter, has become a—if not *the*—chief tool of urban (re)development in Vancouver today. The swift turnaround between council approval and tenant notification would seem to indicate that ENF (and many other housing providers) had been paying close attention to, if not awaiting, the decision. Indeed, during the meeting, one of the CitySpace consultants explained zoning—and with it an ideology of density (see Chapter 1)—as a central rationale for redevelopment.

*It was ultimately weighing all of the options available, all of the criteria of evaluating the situation, the potential for additional density on the site. That is an important factor. We can get net additional units on the site, just given the zoning and the regulations in the area. That's important.* So if it...if you were to take away affordable housing, at the minimum, you want to look at adding to that stock of affordable housing, because we know that when we replace affordable housing, it's hard to keep the sizes the same. We know that it's hard to maintain that level of affordability. And so recognizing that there was a loss, you know, it's important that at a minimum, you're getting net additional units that will warrant that redevelopment process.

But even if zoning was the immediate and primary catalyst for redevelopment, it would be an oversimplification to explain redevelopment as a product of zoning, like a switch flipped or lock turned. Re-zoning and -development are contested processes, strategically propelled and resisted by different groups and a variety of forces. Some ten months before the official rezoning hearing, tenants had noticed surveyors at the building—in their orange vests hunched over their tripods and levels. They noticed, too, that a couple of empty suites had remained vacant for months; and though when they asked for an explanation and ENF claimed that the onset of the Covid pandemic in early 2020 had made filling the units difficult, many tenants remained suspicious: it wasn't as if the pandemic had vanished the city's housing crisis. And then, in

September, tenants confirmed their suspicion when they found a redevelopment permit submitted to the City by ENF, which proposed a new building with almost double the units.

So, for at least a year before the rezoning approval, many tenants had begun to suspect ENF was mulling redevelopment. “I saw it coming,” Budd said, who moved into the building in 2015. “When somebody kind of defers maintenance on a large building with that many tenants: Is it laziness? Is it cost? Or is it, kind of, you're preparing for your profitable future? And I think...the underlying feeling coming into this building, for me, talking to other people, was kind of like: There's no real maintenance on it because we live cheap here. And they'll eventually push us out. But like, it's never gonna happen.”

In the last chapter, I traced a long history of density primarily as it was articulated and transformed from above by Vancouver planners and officials. And in the last section, we saw how when a city-wide EcoDensity policy was pitched to residents, a bloc of homeowners and renters resisted the new charter, which led to its ostensible failure. In this chapter, I offer an ethnographic history of a single nonprofit housing redevelopment in Vancouver to consider how density is worked within a particular tenant-landlord relation. Broadly, I argue that despite its growing prominence within the housing discourse, the “potential for adding density...is an important factor,” as the CitySpaces consultant put, but insufficient to justify or catalyze redevelopment in the face of tenant resistance.

Through interviews with ENF management and Alma Blackwell tenants, along with an analysis of a trove of internal documents related to the redevelopment and the broader newspaper archive, two other key concepts are identified as central to the Vancouver housing discourse, and in particular Alma Blackwell tenants' critique of redevelopment: (1) the displacement of *community* is antithetical to the mission of ENF; and (2) the *demoviction* of an “iconic”

neighborhood building is wasteful. In the next chapter I'll focus in on this second argument—the creative portmanteau that critiques the material destruction and waste of the building. In this chapter, I'll trace the ways community is invoked, contested, and transformed between tenant, property and landlord.

In a basic sense, then, the following two chapters seek to complicate the last. To critique density and its incantation to “Build, Baby, Build” requires more than a story of how the concept grew into *the* dominant lynchpin of the Vancouver housing discourse today (see Wyly 2022: 319). To end the story there, or even to extend the story of density into the smaller nooks of the cityscape would risk (unintentionally) flattening, if not erasing the wider web of language that the housing crisis is entangled with. Instead, by focusing on ‘community’ and ‘demoviction’, I hope to de-center all the density talk by investigating how other old and new language work to propel and housing redevelopment in Vancouver.

There are three sections. First, when ENF was incorporated in the mid 1980s, its founders emphasized a vision of housing that was as much about adding units as it was empowering its tenants’ communities. I argue this vision was a hybrid form that attempted to creatively meld the Cooperative and Society, the two distinct legal forms a social housing organization can choose between; though officially incorporated as a Society, ENF attempted to institutionalize governance and architectural structures that emphasized tenant participation, which were more typical of the Cooperative. Second, I trace the transformation of this hybrid institutional form—what I call a Cooperative Society—from an organization with a holistic (meaning in this case) tenant-focused mission to “more of a housing operator,” as its new CEO put it, with a priority more on building operations and management than the empowerment and development of its tenant communities. Through a close reading of the nonprofit’s bylaw



changes and its operating agreement with the provincial government, I offer a detailed look at how small and steady revisions to ENF's governance structure, especially the period 2004–2012, worked to rollback tenant participation by disqualifying their eligibility from the board of directors.

Lastly, I look at the consequences of this protracted and contested transformation of ENF during the process of Alma Blackwell's redevelopment. Certainly, a Bentham utilitarian ideology of density—the call for “more housing, more density,” as former mayor Kennedy Stewart put it in the last chapter, or the “potential...for net additional units on site,” as the consultant put it—was an essential catalyst and rationale for the redevelopment of Alma Blackwell. Intentions notwithstanding, when redevelopment finally arrived at Alma Blackwell, tenants found themselves hampered by their lack of access to the board and its minutes, as exemplified in the highly-controlled Information Session above, and with a weakened increasingly privatized community unable to effectively organize against redevelopment.

## **2.1 Boards, bylaws, and institutionalization: A Society in a Co-op's clothes**

The seed of what was eventually called the Alma Blackwell community was sown over the first five years of the 1980s, through the break of second-wave feminism, at a local YWCA support group for single mothers. With child-care provided, the women met for respite, and storytelling, and eventually action-based research. They eventually honed in on three shared and interlinked objects of study: women, housing and income. After two years, a new group sprouted from the first, the Single Mother's Action Committee, and from that one another: *Entre Nous Femmes*. More than publish articles and lobby their representatives, their point was to make the vision of ENF themselves. As one of the founders, Leslie Stern, wrote twelve years later for an

anthology called *Community Development Around the World*: ENF “undertook something that had never been done in Vancouver—the planning, development, and management of affordable housing for single mothers, *by single mothers*” (Campfens 1997: 67).

The original mission statement expanded on this vision: “Our primary intent is to provide and manage safe and affordable housing communities for female led single parent families. In recognizing the realities and experiences of female single parents, ENF endeavors to promote its philosophy of creating an environment of opportunity and empowerment. In meeting these goals, the Society acknowledges that a healthy community is one that is comprised of a cross section of family styles.” While today the invocation of “opportunity and empowerment” rings hollow and rolls eyes, at its incorporation in 1984, ENF’s founders seem to have meant it; or rather, they understood that to mean language in more than sound, to enact its meaning in the guttural and legal organization of their collective bodies, required it be institutionalized.

This process of institutionalization was worked in at least two key ways: in (1) the development of Alma Blackwell, and (2) the governing structure of ENF. First, rather than build and then fill a new affordable housing complex with single parents, the ENF board “established a design committee comprised of women,” some of whom were in need of housing themselves and went on to become the building’s first residents (McCleery 2007: 118). The committee worked with an architect and emphasized the “need to monitor their children as the single most important design consideration.” Such substantive participation explains the building’s most distinctive feature: an internal double courtyard to which all the units open.

As one anonymous tenant and sole caregiver put it, the “layout of the units allows you to watch your kids. When the kids were younger, I could have the door open while they were in the courtyard and I could be in the kitchen doing dishes while they were outside” (Interview 1).

More than simply a building in an open space, care was taken with the details of how the courtyard was filled and connected. There was a playground, common room, and laundry room with big windows on three walls looking out into the courtyard. There were even second peepholes put lower down on the apartment doors so that children could also see out at who was knocking or playing. “You can tell there was thought put into the design,” the same tenant continued (Ibid.).

Another tenant recounted how in the common room library there was a book by Jane Jacobs, “a woman who was an American and then she became a Canadian, but she has always worked for community. And she said, the place for tenants is in the courtyard and the common room, so they can be family. And there was a time when all of these wonderful children who became wonderful adults believed that they had 40 mothers and fathers. And they were welcome in every house, because we the tenants vetted the new people who came in to make sure they were willing to work to get the place as we wanted it, which was a safe place for people to expand themselves” (Interview 2).

Which leads to the second way institutionalization, how the governing structure was worked into the organization itself. Specifically, right from incorporation ENF bylaws required its board to be composed of tenant directors elected by residents of each ENF housing property. Indeed, after Alma Blackwell was completed in 1986, ENF grew fast, adding seven more properties throughout the Lower Mainland over the following decade (more on this shortly). From each, a new tenant director was elected to the board, along with a tenant representative to act as volunteer liaison between each buildings’ tenants and the property manager, who was employed by ENF as a superintendent. Paid positions, including the property manager sometimes, were also hired first from within each building, and a robust committee system kept tenants at each

property accountable and active (Geary 1994: 73-4). ENF was “way ahead of their time in terms of the management of a nonprofit board,” as a former staff member of another housing society put it (quoted in Campfens 1997: 69). On the whole, the institution was structured, as one early ENF board member said, like “a shallow pyramid, with a base ten miles long and a lofty peak approximately one inch in height” (quoted in Geary 1992: 74)

Indeed, the institutionalization of tenant participation produced substantive results for both tenants living in the building (at least at Alma Blackwell) and for ENF within the wider, growing nonprofit housing landscape. Alma Blackwell tenants began publishing their own newsletter. There were newspaper features written about ENF, as well as academic case studies. And most tenants quoted spoke glowingly, often romantically, of Alma Blackwell: “It is a little village on the corner of the city and people that live there will describe it as a little village. And when you walk inside it feels like a village—the kids are safe, parents are neighbors. It takes a village to raise a child and Alma-Blackwell is a real village experience in terms of supporting women and raising children.” (McCleery 2007: 137).

15 years later, one tenant I interviewed also used the metaphor of the village to describe Alma Blackwell:

My youngest grandchild was born in this building. And yeah...my youngest granddaughter once said she loved Alma Blackwell [because] she could go to almost any door, any door in the building and knock...and come in for a meal; they would invite her in for a meal. That was her idea of a perfect place to live. And it really is, like, in the thing that people say: takes a village and that kind of thing. The—yeah, the kids had a wonderful time. So in that sense, they made the community work (Interview 3).

What I want to begin drawing out here is how a particular reality on the ground was articulated with particular metaphorical language. ENF was a nonprofit organization envisioned as a “shallow pyramid,” Alma Blackwell an affordable housing complex envisioned as a “village.” And between ENF and its property, quietly and naturally, entered the abstract metaphor of

‘community’. Indeed, community development and tenant participation—these were big subjects of conversation within international and municipal development discourses, whether about housing, conservation, or other kinds of infrastructure development.

Nonetheless, it would be mistaken to imply ENF’s founders or tenants were merely romanticizing tenant participation. The ‘community’ they spoke of was not some universal utopic form, but one particular to their “already overworked” conditions as female single parents. In an early “Information Booklet,” written by the ENF board, “It [was] recognized that participation of residents, while necessary for a sense of true community, may at periods of time be impossible for certain individuals. Undue pressure to participate must not be expected of individuals” (ENF, emphasis mine). An ENF newsletter expanded on the point:

Tenant participation in community management is encouraged, but not mandatory. Single parents are often burdened with multiple responsibilities, and non-resident property managers provide a practical means of support in the daily operation of communities, while still encouraging the ENF philosophy of individual empowerment and responsibility” (quoted in Campfens 1997: 69).

‘Community’ then was understood, both theoretically and practically, in contradistinction to the individual family unit. This yin-yang relation is visible in the architecture: not only did the design team institutionalize a commons through the courtyard, but it also institutionalized a private through the distinct apartment unit. Such a mix of communality and privacy was valued, according to some tenants, because it nurtured a “sense of ownership” over both individual and communal spaces; “the ability to distinguish between units,” as one tenant put, “also served as a powerful symbol of women’s individuality. It provided a balance to the common areas, which symbolized women’s connections and community.”

We can also see the relational tension between community and individual, public and private, back in the organizational structure of the nonprofit. At the point of incorporation, the

founders were forced to choose from a menu of two nonprofit forms: a Society or Cooperative. The critical difference between the two is that in a Cooperative all tenants must be members and are in effect collectively responsible for the building—their own landlord so to speak; while in a Society tenants may be members but not board members, as we’ll discuss, and are individually responsible for their own rental units. Thus, responsibility became a key consideration, and ENF’s founders chose Society because they reasoned that it offered a more flexible, less time-demanding participatory structure with more opportunities for paid work. “A rental building had the potential to create real jobs close to home, at the same time, it would provide service rather than load on another set of demands” (Campfens 1997: 69).

But even if ENF is legally just a Society, in practice it seemed also to look like a Cooperative. What made the organization unique was an attempt by the founders and early board members to hybridize these two nonprofit forms, to port in some of the architectural and organizational structures of the Cooperative into the Society. Indeed, the internal courtyard was an architecture first adapted within Vancouver by and for the Cooperative (Ley 1993). ENF’s tenant board and broader emphasis on tenant participation was and remains an institutional structure and vision more typical to the Cooperative. A 1992 provincial report on the nonprofit housing landscape noted that “[T]here is very little participation by tenants in the ongoing operation and management of the projects in which they live”; and went on to recommend the province “require that the boards of all societies which provide housing through the Non-Profit Housing Program *must* include tenant representation” (Audain and Duvall 1992: 63, emphasis mine). Thus, ENF in its early years might be better described as an attempt to construct a new hybrid nonprofit form that blended the perceived perks of its two distinct forms. A third way, you might say. So why didn’t it work?

## **2.2. Stitching the text and con-text of ENF's devolution**

After Alma Blackwell was completed in 1986, ENF grew fast, adding seven more properties throughout the Lower Mainland over the following decade. But already by the early 90s, cracks in the nonprofit's "shallow pyramid" were evident. At its annual retreat in 1993, the ENF board decided to pause its fast-paced growth to focus on shoring up its organizational structure. In a statement quoted in Geary's thesis, it explained the shift:

"Recently ENF embarked on a reassessment of resident involvement. The intention is to be clear and honest about what resident involvement means. Despite challenges, ENF remains an organization committed to participatory management" (Geary 1994: 74). Despite generally high levels of participation, some community members already felt left out of the decision-making process. According to one of the founders, Leslie Stern, a key issue was how much "say and control" tenants have in their own "communities" over selection of new tenants (quoted in Campens 1997). In the same year, a workshop on this and related questions was held for tenants at all ENF buildings in 1993.

Before zooming in further on the tensions of these organizational politics, I offer a brief contextual note about the conspicuous coincidence missing from ENF's explanation of its own "reassessment." 1993 was also the year that the federal government "completely withdrew from the national housing program," which functionally downloaded housing development to the provincial and municipal levels (Vert 2005: 30). The nonprofit sector filled the void in the lurch, with ENF arriving on the scene at the tail end of this neoliberal rollback. As David Ley writes "By the late 1970s, the pipeline of new public housing had ended, and from 1979 to 1993, 18,000–20,000 non-profit and co-op units were added nationally each year" (Ley et al. 2020:

446). Even if ENF had reassessed and decided it wanted to continue with fast-paced growth, that end was getting harder to achieve.

In particular, the growth ENF managed from the late 1980s onwards was of a particular agglomerative kind. Of the 11 properties it owns and manages today, all but one were already-existing housing complexes with pre-existing tenants, the majority acquired prior to the turn of the century. In fact, Alma Blackwell is the only property ENF developed from scratch, and thus the only one in which some shape of relationality, among tenants and between tenants and landlord, did not already exist. Implicit within ENF's growth, then, was a belief that despite the congealed social conditions it was inheriting, it could nonetheless institutionalize tenant participation in these already established buildings. But this proved easier said than done. Already by the mid 1990s, Geary had documented an uneven, contentious process of growth within the nonprofit as it attempted to scale-up its Cooperative Society model of tenant participation. At some ENF properties, tenant directors and representatives were never elected. At others, participation on committees peaked and waned.

It would be an oversimplification, though, to infer that ENF would have succeeded to scale its Cooperative Society model if it could have—in a different political economy—designed and developed all its housing as it had with Alma Blackwell; and, thus by extension, that it was growth itself in its most abstracted form that corrupted its hybrid participatory-paternal model. Certainly, a quote-unquote blank slate built with tenant participation and for tenant interaction was critical to the early and distinct success of Alma Blackwell. But Alma Blackwell was not immune to the broader institutional struggle.

For instance, the quarterly newsletter, which had been written and published by tenants (with much heavy lifting from a single tenant), ceased publishing by the mid 2000s; it was



eventually restarted, though by ENF. The committee system, too, had by the mid 2000s lost its active zeal and was eventually ended. Around 2012, an Alma Blackwell Facebook group was started and gradually became tenants' primary medium of collective communication. In interviews in the 90s, some tenants emphasized to Geary the tension between participation and privacy. As one tenant put it, "community was not the only, nor the most important facet of their lives." An ENF staff member concluded similarly: "Is participation the residents' *agenda* or are we imposing it on them?" (Geary 1994: 79).

But an "agenda" is never merely a matter of interest; or rather, interest is never merely an organic, internal process that should be accepted on its face. Interest, desire, value is made, contested, and remade anew through the heat of ecological, economic, and social forces. Tensions between participation and privacy, between communalism and individualism (just to name two pertinent dyads) don't interact as some transhistorical, primordial way of human society. For instance, the difficulty for some single parent tenants to uphold their responsibilities as board members was not insurmountable. Consider the counterfactual: For example, with investment distributed more towards existing operations (rather than construction and expansion), ENF could have provided tenant directors with childcare and travel support (if not compensation) during board meetings and retreats, a challenge which some tenants mentioned specifically limited their ability to participate actively. A key point here, then, is that just as tenant participation at Alma Blackwell did not decay predominantly because of ENF's rapid growth, it also did not decay as if by some natural loss—some seemingly thermodynamic force of collective fatigue.

So how to draw a more materialist account of this participatory decay? On the ground at Alma Blackwell, tenants, staff, and (board) members alike emphasized how the substantive

definition of participation was circumscribed before it arrived at their doors, let alone the board room. Even with full tenant *representation on the board*, the open question on the table was never about full *control of the building*, as in a Cooperative: even if the founders hoped to institutionalize the aura of the Cooperative in ENF, such a hybrid, tenant-empowered vision of housing encountered the disciplining structure of property law embedded within the nonprofits legal form as a Society.

As tensions at ENF developed through the early 2000s, some pointed out that “any participatory management scheme has to function *within* the present reality...Participatory management may provide a sense of ownership and an accompanying sense of responsibility to the residents; however, the *real* ownership still lies with the Society...This ‘reality’ places certain restrictions on the amount of control residents can have” (Geary 1997: 98-9, emphasis mine). Here, the “real” is made equivalent with the “legal.” Non-tenant board members admitted that partnership would be “ideal,” but pointed to the restrictions and pressure placed on them by the provincial government to focus on “maintenance, financial and administrative aspects of management, in other words, to be a landlord in the conventional sense (Geary 1997: 80). “Reality” then becomes an articulation of what is deemed immovable, or hegemonic: private property relations. As one board member put it at the time, “The real question behind all of this is ‘who owns this building?’

The answer to that question is not so straightforward, and brings in to relief the state, which looms simultaneously over and at an arms-length from ENF. Ownership—of Alma Blackwell, and the vast majority of non-profit housing projects in British Columbia in the last three decades of the 20th century—is interpolated by operating agreements. These funding contracts essentially “formalized the relationship between BCHMC and the Sponsor over the expected...life of a

project,” stipulating repayment conduct and repayment conditions (BCHMC 1993, as quoted in Geary; also see Pomeroy 2017). In particular, operating agreements “limited housing providers’ autonomy in the use of reserve funds and equity, regulated the number and type of subsidies that could be offered, and did not allow private financing to cover renovations or other costs” (Cooper 2022: 8). In other words, an operating agreement structured the form of non-profitability, and thus the acts that a nonprofit housing Society could take in practice. It provided the state, here directly the BC provincial government, some amount of sustained surveillance and disciplinary powers over the very nonprofit sector it was simultaneously ceding its role to. In signing the agreement then, the state provided ENF with access to low and no-interest mortgages to develop affordable housing, but under the condition that ENF uphold particular standards. As quoted in Alma Blackwell’s original operating agreement:

The Society shall furnish efficient management of the Project (sic), maintain the Project (sic) in a satisfactory state of repair and fit for habitation and will comply with health and safety standards including any standards required by law, and shall permit representatives of the Commission (BCHMC) to inspect the Project (sic) at any reasonable time. If in the opinion of the Commission, the Society is not providing efficient management or maintaining the Project (sic) in a satisfactory state of repair, the Society, under direction of the Commission, will rectify the deficiencies (BCHMC 1991: 5, quoted in Geary)

As an ENF staff member said about partnership or control back in 1993: “It is not possible to share certain things because of the Operating Agreement which sets up expectations and clearcut lines of authority and responsibility” (Geary 1992: 99). One housing provider in Manitoba described their operating agreement as such: “(The provincial government) wanted to control the rents. *They didn’t want you wasting money.* And they had all these rules around how you could save, and what you could save, and what you could spend and how you spend it. You need three quotes for everything, and you need consultants involved, and everything has to be accountable” (Cooper 2022: 8).

Participation, then, was delimited by the material conditions of the predominantly single-parent tenants themselves, and the agreement made between the Society and state over property, which prioritized the development and improvement of the building over that of the resident community. And it was the latter, the authority of the operating agreement, the sense of its non-negotiable “reality,” that typically got the final word. The open questions about Alma Blackwell which tenants could participate in answering orbited closer to issues of local day-to-day management and communal development; the fiscal or legal decision making of the organization remained with the board. The critical distinction here—between participatory *management* and tenant *control* is helpful to clarify the particularities of power relations at play. As Sherry Arnstein famously put it, “participation without redistribution of power is an empty and frustrating process for the powerless. It allows the powerholders to claim that all sides were considered, but it makes it possible for only some of those sides to benefit” (Arnstein 1969: 216).

Still, it’s essential not to fall prey to the tempting insinuation of conspiracy. I found no evidence over ENF’s development of a duplicitous claim or secret agenda, nor of a board takeover hoping to exploit the financial capacity of the Society for their own benefit. Instead, a close reading of internal ENF documents reveals a protracted and contentious transformation of the organization at the site of the board room, in which the board attempted to hold onto its Cooperative vision of tenant governance through the early 2000s, as it simultaneously attempted to uphold its operating agreements. In the original bylaws from 1985, as noted, ENF not only permitted tenants to be members and/or directors, but mandated a particular mix of representation from tenants and non-tenants.

By 1994, in the wake of the “reassessment,” ENF began tinkering with its bylaws surrounding membership and directorship. First, it expanded the size of the board of directors to

sixteen seats, an effort to expand the hybrid model of cooperation piloted at Alma Blackwell to all its newly acquired properties: Eight seats were reserved for elected tenants, one from each ENF housing property, and the other eight for elected non-tenants, typically from the wider nonprofit sector. Such a structure, ENF explained, recognized “the experiences of single parents as a valuable contribution to society” (ENF 1995: s.5.28). It also tracked with the Society’s growth and a vision of an organization represented by tenants elected from each of its housing developments.

Second, it added a distinction between “active” and “inactive” *members*. The re-definition added the requirement that to keep one’s membership ‘active’ you had to attend three board meetings in the past 12 months (ENF 1995: s.2.5-8). In 1999, another amendment similarly distinguished between “active” and “inactive” *directors*. If a director lost their active designation, which required attending three consecutive board meetings, they lost the right to vote (ENF 1999: S.5.28.3). Clearly the intention of bifurcating memberships and directorships was to address a participation problem on the board.

But in 2001, the board dropped the active/inactive distinction all together and made tenants, contractors, and employees ineligible for membership (ENF 2001: s.3), while retaining tenant eligibility for directorship (Ibid. s.22). In 2004, another bylaw change made employees and contractors ineligible for membership, and directorship only open to members—thus retaining tenants' eligibility for both membership and directorship. This was a shift in discursive strategy, moving from disqualification to ineligibility, from the bifurcation of its highest-ranking class to the distinction between its two classes. In 2010—one year after the last ENF founder, April English, resigned from the board along with perhaps the last vestige of the original institutional vision—no tenants were elected to the board for the first time in ENF history. And then in 2013,

a four-person board—all outsiders, three of the four of whom had been elected after English’s departure—amended the bylaws to formally exclude tenants from membership and directorship (ENF 2014: s.2.4).

How to explain this bylaw tinkering? From a quantitative standpoint, according to annual reports, tenant representation on the board of directors increased after the 1993 “reassessment”, and reached its highest levels over the rest of the 1990s, averaging over 70 percent.<sup>7</sup> The decline began around 2000—a year *before* the board’s discursive shift from disqualification to ineligibility—with tenant representation dropping to around 15 percent by the second half of the decade. While there is no formal bylaw that would have directly caused this drop, by 2007, it seems that an informal bylaw had come into effect limiting tenant representation to a single seat on the board, according to interviews with staff and tenants (McCleery 2007: 151).

In a basic sense, then, the creative legal redefinitions of membership and directorship did, eventually lead to the total legal restriction of tenant participation from the board. But it would be another oversimplification to infer that these bylaw changes to the board caused, or even catalyzed the transformation on the ground at Alma Blackwell. Critical, then, as we move into the consequences of ENF’s transformation, is the protracted and contentious form of this reassessment process—the span from 1999–2004 when the right to elect tenants as directors was upheld by the board. It would seem that for over a decade the board resisted fully relinquishing its founding hybrid vision of a Cooperative Society—at least as measured on paper.

When I asked a current ENF property manager why Alma Blackwell had changed, she pointed at immigration policy, behind which, implicitly, was the state. “25 years ago,

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<sup>7</sup> Calculating tenant and non-director representation was achieved by matching the addresses listed by each director and the addresses of properties owned by ENF.

communities were more Canadian.” At the properties she managed, tenants seemed to self-segregate into ethnic enclaves. It seemed to her that diversity actually led to fractured community. The racial logic here is notable for how smoothly it seems to naturalize the loss of ‘community’. The nonprofit provider is not to blame. Property is not to blame. The state is not exactly to blame. And tenants themselves are not to blame. Loss of a communal aura is just an unfortunate and inevitable byproduct of immigration policy and a natural tendency between disparate groups of people.

The slippage between participatory management and tenant control was less a trick played on the tenant by the landlord, as Arnstein implies, as it was a contradiction played out between them both. As an early board member and founder put it, the nonprofit society was a “vehicle” which could be used (to) make life better for people like themselves (Geary 1994: 108), with community development the road that guided its trajectory. But the founders didn’t anticipate the fact that they weren’t the only driver. Intentions aside, the tenant-centric mission was, from the beginning, in tension with a nexus of legal frameworks and socio-economic conditions that prioritized a more traditional landlord-tenant model. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore puts it, “if forms do indeed shape norms, then what's wrong is that the work people set out to accomplish is vulnerable to becoming mission impossible under the sternly specific funding rubrics and structural prohibitions...(with modest funding) mostly restricted to projects rather than core operations” (Gilmore 2017: 47).

In December 2018, at the annual residential meeting, tenants were told by then-executive director of ENF Lisa Clement that though ENF had paid off the mortgage and now owned Alma Blackwell outright, its operating agreement with BC Housing, which essentially provides the Society the funding to offer low and subsidize rentals, was expiring in 2020. According to tenant

accounts of the meeting, Clement said that to re-negotiate a new operating agreement, the “old building” required about half a million dollars in renovations. “The good news is the provincial government has announced there is more money to do that.”

Some tenants were still worried: “I love my home here and is (sic) the only one my children know of. I just want to know when the agreement hits are we going to lose our home.” According to meeting minutes taken by tenants, Clement tried to assure them: “No. ENF is financially viable, Alma Blackwell is financially viable, there are no threats to this building. No one has anything to worry about.” A year later, at the next residential meeting, tenants said they were again assured by Clement that, though a property assessment was underway, there were still “no plans to consider redevelopment” (Alma Blackwell 2020: 5). But there was a threat: ENF’s operating agreement with BC Housing, the housing arm of the provincial government, was due to expire in 2020.

In April 2019, days after Lisa Clement filed the redevelopment application for Alma Blackwell, she was either removed or resigned from ENF’s board. In 2020, Lilian Chau, with the new title of CEO and salary to boot, was hired in her place. Chau, who holds a graduate degree in urban planning, was upfront that ENF had over the years “morphed more into a housing operator.” Still, she said that she wants to “bring back more of that original community mission.” But what Chau means by “community” is quite different than what its founders imagined in the 80s and 90s. Chau supports “resident-led programming, but sees the idea of tenants on the board of directors as an “*inherent* conflict of interest.” She gave the example of maintenance over the course of a building’s lifespan: to cover the costs, would tenants voluntarily raise their own rents? At least in the one example of a co-op she cited, the answer was no, and now it was too



late, too costly to repair, and the co-op board was looking to off-load the property. “Their lesson was a group of community residents weren’t great asset managers.”

Chau’s concern was not new. Back in the 90s, at the height of tenant participation, ENF tenant directors were explicitly “asked to leave their tenancy at the door.” Nonetheless, some staff still saw the early board as insular and even prejudice, often “overwhelmed with addressing specific resident issues and complaints, preventing them from focusing on broader programming issues and the housing society’s overall mission and mandate” (McCleery 2007: 153-4). And yet, while it’s undoubtedly true that a board of tenant directors presents unique challenges between navigating personal versus institutional interests, the implication that a board of non-tenant directors is “inherently” more objective and take better care of their property portfolio obfuscates the nature and site of the conflict: the problem is less a matter of who owns the property, and more about the commodified nature of the property. As the famous film director Jean-Luc Godard said: “We often say ‘conflict of interest’, which is a tautology. There is no conflict, big or small, unless there is interest” (Godard 2022). As I discuss more in the next chapter, landlords, nonprofit and private alike, are notorious for neglecting the repair of their property, especially if it might informally evict a troublesome or rent-controlled tenant from a valuable unit, or more intensely, lead to the premature obsolescence of an entire building, formal eviction of all tenants, and redevelopment or sale of increasingly valuable land.

### **2.3 Redevelopment and the invocation of ‘community’**

A subtle first glimpse of how this property relation transformed at ENF is readable on the nominal, hollowed out surface of the organization’s website. On a page listing its housing projects, a majority are named after women: relatives of founders, original members, early

tenants. A potential tenant clicking through can read intimate blurbs about the lives of these women. For example, at Natalia's Terrace: "Natalia's story of hope and perseverance against all odds speaks to the core of how ENF works within community, through the encouragement of the hopes and dreams of families everywhere." Such storytelling strives and works to personify both property and provider with a particular communal, feminist, and entrepreneurial aesthetic, one which might endear the imagination of a prospective tenant to see or feel their home as more than a unit or piece of property. And yet, interestingly, a close reading of ENF's portfolio reveals that of its 11 properties, only the seven built or acquired in the 80s and 90s possess such biographical blurbs. It seems that ENF snubbed or abandoned its own project of producing a consistent, particular identity only for those properties acquired in the late 2000s, towards the climax of its own protracted restructuring.

More substantively, at Alma Blackwell the tensions surrounding these property relations within ENF's mission became manifest around the common room. In the early years, the room was a space that provided the always-awaiting potential of communal interaction: where parties and holidays were celebrated; where kids studied or hung out late at night; where parents studied too and took breaks from the kids; where annual meetings were held. Tenants were free to use the space as they pleased and considered it an "extended living room," as one tenant described it to me.

One tenant who was on the original design committee recollected how there used to be a library in the common room and how her daughter-in-law used to hold a reading club for the children on Thursday nights:

While their mothers were having a bit of a rest, the youngsters went down to the common room...Stories were read to them. Every week, [my daughter-in-law] went around to bookstores, got free books. Someone won the draw and got a free book every week. One of my nephews won one, still got it. He remembers those. She made hot chocolate too, really

good hot chocolate. We used to have real fires in the fireplace. We had potluck dinners for every occasion you could think of. And one person's birthday was everyone's birthday because we were family.

But at some point in the mid 2000s—right as the ENF board of directors was making eligibility changes to the bylaws—the policy shifted. The room was locked and a single key was given to the property manager. Tenants now had to formally request and retrieve this key whenever they wanted to use the room and put down a \$100 deposit security deposit. Initially, tenants actually circumvented this new policy by secretly making copies of the key and distributing them. But eventually the policy was changed again, along with the lock, and the property manager now unlocked the room directly without ever giving up possession of the key.

In 2017, ENF renovated the common room, which tenants were thankful for until they became privy that ENF intended to rent the space out to outside groups. As long-time tenant Eva Aboud put it:

Then we all said: ‘Well, we all have an issue about that, because the common room has access to our courtyard. And if you're going to be bringing in a whole bunch of strangers, well, we don't want them exiting from the other door, you know, the door that's right here by the stairwell to come through our courtyards, right? So you gotta like, keep it separate from the families, right?’ Like, what do you mean, you're going to be renting it out to the public? What public?

Though the proposal was dropped after the redevelopment plans were announced, the privatization of the common space was not an inevitability. The idea was conceived and accepted by a new board that had grown farther and farther removed from the tenants to whom they provided housing.

In retrospect, the enclosure of the common room at Alma Blackwell foreshadowed the consequences of ENF's failure to institutionalize its Cooperative Society model, and the challenges Alma Blackwell tenants would face in resisting redevelopment. After the Information

Session with ENF and CitySpaces in 2020, many tenants left feeling shocked, if not despair, while a smaller minority wanted to fight back. Larson said that after she closed her computer, “I just remember feeling determined...This is wrong. They can’t do this. ...” Budd echoed this early conviction. “And at that point, I also thought there needs, there's going to be a safety net for us,” Budd said. “Organizations that are going to catch this and say 'Hey, hold on', and put a pause on it and maybe get the right steps in line.”

Over the summer of 2021, tenants began traversing the safety net. Three times they met with the mayor’s director of communications. They met with the planning department who, according to one tenant in the meeting, “seemed kind of blindsided by this whole thing and then went on summer vacation.” They petitioned BC Premier, John Horgan. They met with BC housing minister, David Eby; with multiple sympathetic city council members; with the Tenant Resource and Advisory Centre (TRAC); the Grandview Woodland Area Council (GWAC); the Vancouver Tenants Union (VTU). According to Budd, “no concrete actions” were taken by the government beyond a gesture towards the planning department and BC Housing. “And in contrast to where I'm sitting right now, I'm like, there is no safety net,” Budd said. “There's literally city officials that are saying, ‘We can't do anything about it. Whoops, there was a mistake. Unfortunately, it's the developer’s property and they can do whatever they want with it’.”

Without the government in their corner, and no longer with a seat at the table, tenants began advocating for themselves, becoming sleuths and spokespeople. They filed Freedom of Information requests for BC Housing documents related to the redevelopment; they dove into the judicial archives and found a curious lawsuit in which the City of Vancouver had sued ENF by challenging its charitable mandate. They went to the press, which briefly picked up the story over the summer. “Demolition forcing out residents of Vancouver affordable housing

complex.” They were looking for dirt that might somehow undermine the redevelopment, to make ENF. They even wrote up their own story, full of a detailed timeline of events, their own research on ENF’s history, and statements from tenants, titled “Help Save Alma Blackwell.” The subhead, which runs atop all 20 pages, reads: “A plea from the remainder of a thriving and diverse community in East Vancouver being “demovicted.”

Tenants were looking for a ‘gotcha’, proof that ENF was either in violation of the letter of the law or spirit of the nonprofit model. And there were at least two crucial types of internal documents they honed in on that might have provided it: (1) meeting minutes, and (2) a cost comparison of redevelopment vs. renovation. Only these documents could corroborate or contradict the story ENF was telling by answering the questions of what it knew, when it knew it, and how it came to know. Some tenants believed, or at least hoped, that these documents might make the redevelopment scandalous or illegal; that if no one from the City was on their side, that perhaps the law would be. “If they can, you know, if they come with case documents and say, ‘Hey, here's the proof. It will cost much more to fix the building than to tear it down’—I probably would have yielded and said alright, too bad. Okay, let's do [the redevelopment] then. But they never did. They never produced any figures at all on why this building should be considered unrepairable. And they haven't to this day.”

And it’s here, at the site of information access, that we see perhaps the key consequence of the protracted transformation of ENF and Alma Blackwell. According to the most up-to-date ENF bylaws, board meeting minutes and special resolutions, “shall not be open to inspection by any member of the Society not being a director” (Alma Blackwell 2019: s.15.1). The bylaws do explicitly state that the directors can choose to provide these documents to non-board members at their discretion. But according to tenants, their multiple requests were “blocked or ignored”

(Alma Blackwell 2020: 3). The counterfactual is both obvious and critical: If tenants were still board members, the redevelopment could not have been enacted as smoothly or swiftly. Without government support, as well as their own degree of institutional control, then, tenants lacked effective support and information to resist redevelopment through economic and legal arguments.

Instead, they leaned more on a moral argument: that ENF was not “looking after them” and thus in violation of its social mandate. “We have been blocked from being members of the [S]ociety over the last 1.5 decades,” they state in their Plea. “We do not receive any notification as to when [ENF] constitutions, bylaws or the society's mission statement change. Shouldn't we though since we are ‘in actual occupation of the unit which fulfills the societies charitable purposes’? .... yet we have no knowledge or voice as to the [S]ociety’s direction or business?” Their inaccess was an injustice itself.

At a neighborhood association meeting a couple months after relocations had begun, tenants emphasized the incongruity between their treatment by ENF and the ostensible ‘community’ identity the nonprofit espoused.

TENANT: They are the ones that need to leave, that management needs to leave, because they are not contributing to our community at all. And when they say they are building community and community engagement. That's bullshit (GWAC 2021).

Towards the end of the meeting, board member Penny Street articulated the tension between redevelopment and the destruction of ‘community’. “I just don't get it. You know, there's a huge housing crisis in the city. And here we have 47 units. And, and they're perfectly good. And everybody, *it's a really strong community*. I can't understand why you can't just continue to exist, and they can't just build their new building somewhere else?”

Jean Swanson, the only city council member to attend the meeting, said she had asked this question about a similar redevelopment that happened a couple streets away, on Venables, where another affordable housing provider displaced 64 seniors in order to build a taller, denser building. “And I went to the city and said, let's give them a piece of land, we're in a housing crisis, all those people that are in there are going to have to go to a unit that some homeless person can't go to because they have to go to it.” The problem with that solution, Swanson said the Council told her, is the cost of land. “That's the technical reason,” Swanson said. “So the only way a nonprofit can afford to build housing is if they already own the land. So I know that's not a very good reason, but that's the one that I got. I tried working on it for...a year and a half or so, but it never went any place” (GWAC 2021).

“Well, it just sounds like Entre Nous Femme is in it for the money rather than for the people that live in their housing,” Street responded. “Because it just doesn't make sense. You don't kick people out of your nonprofit housing when you're in the nonprofit housing business. What's that all about?...I just can't believe that this is happening. It just seems ridiculous.” Another tenant chimed in: “And...we are all for affordable housing. I mean, I need it. So this is not about let's not make more affordable housing. I don't think that's a question. It's let's not kick out people that need the affordable housing to create more affordable housing for people. To me the logic doesn't make sense...But *tearing apart existing communities of people is you know, troubling*. And obviously, I mean, you know, beyond just Alma Blackwell, this has really serious implications for our neighborhood and our others in terms of where will it go from here?” (Ibid.)

A number of tenants went further, suggesting both at the neighborhood association meeting and in interviews, that something “fishy” was going on with the redevelopment. Had I seen who was on the new board? Why weren't they providing a copy of the cost analysis? Had ENF even

done one, or was it circumventing the possibility for repair? Was redevelopment less about building more affordable housing than it was about finding a legal way to demolish and cash in on the property's untapped land value? Was this about profit? As one board member at the neighborhood association meeting put it, "Nonprofit doesn't mean no profit. There are plenty of ways to make money."

As a journalist by first trade, the prospect of a powerful bad actor was tantalizing from the start of this project. If there was a smoking gun hidden under the floorboards, and I could help find it, I could help tenants stop the wrecking ball. And yes, it was and remains tenants I hope to support. But such a moralizing tendency can be dangerous, and work to obscure an analysis that leads to better strategy:

Combine criticism with enough moralizing, and monsters appear everywhere—evil robber baron capitalists, lying politicians, greedy speculators, sadistic police, insane war criminals. Calling something a monster is admitting that you don't understand it. There are plenty of bosses, bankers, landlords, and developers that should probably be severely beaten in an alley somewhere, but demonizing them only covers up how the system continually recreates repressive police, asshole bosses, and two-faced politicians—not to mention weak, timid, prejudiced, and isolated workers...An important step in getting rid of monsters is to stop thinking of them as monsters" (Prole Info 2012: 140)

When I pressed tenants for a less conspiratorial explanation, there was a certain mystification that seemed to have settled around the protracted transformation of their residential community. One tenant, who moved into Alma Blackwell in 2005, said part of the change was demographic: Through the first decade of the 2000s, she said the complex was "teeming with kids [who] were basically running the place." In fact, Larson's daughter, by then a young single mother with her own kids, already lived in the building, and had helped secure an apartment for her mother, and brother soon after that. But by the mid 2010s "most of those kids had grown up" and moved out, according to Larson. "There were fewer kids" now, "*but I can't say exactly how many or why*" (Tenant 2).



Eva Aboud, another longtime tenant, also spoke of similar changes on the ground at Alma Blackwell, and also couldn't exactly say why they had occurred.

It's just the whole way, they approached us with it, right? It was just like, just right in our face here. This is what's going to happen without consulting us without talking about us, then that's because *over the years, we lost that kind of value* of community work together with the property manager and the board. And having the minutes and understanding the process and being part of it. That was the whole idea. *But somehow that slowly, slowly, slowly got diminished.* And you know, it did they take advantage I think of I think everybody kind of went through crisis and things like that. When did that happen? Or oh, it's been that long, and there hasn't been a board meeting, you know, like, *somehow it slipped away from us.* If I had known like, now, in hindsight, you know, like, we should have been on top of all of that. But little did we know then that it was going to come to this? Right? I'm not sure what you are implying with these quotes.

In 2021, local historian Jak King summed up the story of Alma Blackwell in a blog post titled 'The Killing of Alma Blackwell':

Although not legally structured as a co-op, the ENF project operated within that milieu: the residents helped build and maintain the buildings, and controlled the Society. However, *as the years passed*, the governance became more and more removed from the residents, more distant, until today the residents are not only not allowed to be directors of the society, and are routinely refused access to the Society's minutes, they even find it difficult to find out who *is* a director of their Society (King 2021).

This sense of gradual diminishment—the repeated “somehow” of this slippage—is critical not only as a question to explain, but for the very experience of its mystery. That is, within Aboud's recollection of “slow” change on the ground at Alma Blackwell, and King's summary of the Society's history, there is a certain inexplicability surrounding the causality of this “lost...value of community work,” of time itself becoming the “pass[ive]” force of change. The proliferation of ‘community’ in the wake of the disintegration of community was mystified, then, not naturally “as the years passed,” but in the protracted and contested political struggle to institutionalize and de-institutionalize tenant participation within ENF and Alma Blackwell's governance and architectural form.

To bring some threads together, ENF attempted to create a hybrid model of housing development, a Cooperative Society, with a two-pronged mission of developing more affordable housing and empowering its tenants to participate in both the development and management of said housing along with the broader trajectory of the nonprofit. To institutionalize the cooperative side of the hybrid model, its early founders and board members had used a two-pronged strategy, focusing on empowering its tenants through the governance structure of the organization and the architectural structure of its buildings. Alma Blackwell was ENF's pilot and pre-eminent case study of this institutionalization strategy, with a vibrant courtyard and active committee system that seemed to prove the model's potential success to scale.

But over the first two decades following incorporation, tension grew between and within these two entangled missions of housing development and tenant empowerment. As federal and provincial investment in public housing development dried up in the early 90s in Vancouver, ENF was unable to acquire funds to buy land and develop housing from scratch, and instead shifted to an acquisition strategy of already-established affordable housing from smaller, often struggling Societies. Most of these buildings lacked courtyards and came with pre-existing, often more traditional landlord-tenant relationalities amongst the residents, which proved more challenging to transform.

Still, ENF's failure to replicate Alma Blackwell in built form and social structure, and the broader tensions that exacerbated within its hybrid model, cannot be explained fundamentally or exclusively by the new policy regime of affordable housing disinvestment that was rolling out. Also critical was the older institution of private property, which was reproduced between state and nonprofit through operating agreements. Such agreements signed in the 1980s between housing Societies like ENF and the BC provincial government instantiated a particular relation

surrounding the property in question that emphasized the responsibility of the Society to uphold and improve the “health and safety” of the building. Even if there existed an implicit logic within these agreements to protect tenants along with the property, such protective logic assumed and reproduced a traditional paternal landlord-tenant relation which exacerbated the tension between ENF’s responsibility to the state and its vision to share that responsibility with its tenants.

The emphasis on property relations, then, is important to defend against an incomplete analysis that implies simply re-investing in public housing development will on its own solve the housing crisis. As I argued in Chapter 1, certainly investing in more public affordable housing development is essential. But such a supply-side, narrowly fiscal orthodoxy downplays the way property relations not only challenge concurrent attempts to develop infrastructures of tenant power along the way that would satisfy not only narrow and essential housing needs of individuals but also nurture housing collectivities amongst tenant communities.

As Saidiya Hartman argues, any invocation of community must resist an idealized and homogenized form (1997: 61). Community is made not found, destroyed not lost, and essentializing such a material process mystifies the social relations. Community, in its nostalgic-aspirational rendering, is reified into a utopian ideal, a floating signifier of sorts. If it had a resonance, it might sound a bit like the Siren’s Call: A craving—(to risk a moment of psychoanalysis)—born out of a romanticized urgency, vibrating a valence so tantalizing it can almost blind one from their surroundings. Community, then, is experienced as not only or even predominantly an “actually existing” phenomenon, or even a discursive battleground, but also a historical fantasy. Alma Blackwell tenants evoke the building’s “legacy of feminism” and ENF its potential bigger community. One legitimizes and the other resists redevelopment. Both evoke a community of reciprocity, kinship, and trust.

### **Chapter 3: Tenant resistance and the rise of the demoviction**

When tenants of Alma Blackwell (AB) began organizing against the redevelopment of their affordable housing complex in East Vancouver, they often encapsulate their situation in a new word: “Please Stop the Demoviction of an Iconic Building & Community in East Vancouver”; “A Plea from the remainder of a thriving and diverse community in East Vancouver being ‘demovicted’.” So reads the titles of a petition and report they published in 2020. I had never heard the word before and it hooked my ear, something simultaneously intuitive and intricate about its meaning.

In this chapter I continue following the language of housing around, but from the bottom up. If density was coined and still is used by planners, politicians, and developers to justify and direct re-development (Chapter 1), the demoviction was coined by tenants to resist it. In 2015, in the neighboring city of Burnaby, a coalition of housing activists launched the Stop Demoviction Burnaby campaign to contest the redevelopment and displacement of thousands of tenants in the downtown core. The coalition had been inspired by the renoviction, which was coined in 2008 by another tenant movement in the West End to resist hundreds of renovation-induced evictions. And though these groups disbanded, their creative language lives on. In 15 years, the demoviction and renoviction have traveled across and out of Metro Vancouver—into BC property law, urban theory and scholarship, and tenant rhetoric, predominantly in British Columbia but as far as Halifax and Sweden.

Together the portmanteaus target the two primary techniques (renovation and demolition) landlords can use to legally evict tenants in British Columbia without cause. They attempt to interrupt the process of redevelopment by foregrounding its byproducts—the evicted tenant and the demolished or disrepaired building. As the tenants of Alma Blackwell put it in their petition:

How can ENF destroy a “building that is iconic...without considering repair”? How can it send “people who need affordable housing into the street to build affordable housing for other people? How does this make sense?! It seems like shuffling deck chairs on the Titanic.”

Taking up this key question of tenants, I ask how demolition, repair, and eviction are *made* to “make sense” within a particular redevelopment regime? And how does the demoviction work to interrupt this process of sense-making? Towards this aim, I try and distinguish two uses of demoviction as they both operate at the same time: (1) as a *technical process* of (neoliberal) urbanization from above; and (2) as a *rhetorical critique* of the same technical process from below. While scholarship on the demoviction can be counted on one hand, it has exclusively focused on the former definition (see Crosby 2020l; Ramiller 2021; Filipic 2017). Tending to these two faces of the demoviction together will, I hope, keep desk-crafted theory in touch with the literal and metaphorical stakes tenants combat on the ground.<sup>8</sup>

I’ll trace a history of the demoviction in three parts. In the first two parts, I’ll flesh out the two recent tenant movements in Metro Vancouver where the renoviction and demoviction were coined. Paying attention to the language surrounding the both, I argue that distinct dominant framings—the renoviction as an exceptional “loophole” and demoviction as a normative “process” of property development—shape the ways the terms were understood and acted upon out of these movement. Bridging these two local histories together I demonstrate how this young local language attempts to cohere a critique within a fractured landscape of tenant resistance

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<sup>8</sup> My hope here is to not to further dichotomize some discursive-material binary, but to highlight the already entangled ways language and matter manifest in the relationships between bodies and buildings. Holding theory and practice/usage in contradistinction will hopefully help keep these contentious and contradictory relations of redevelopment active, and take seriously the language of tenant resistance as a site of practice that is already theorized (Berlant). I want to understand works and how it might work better?

focused on the byproducts of redevelopment—the wasted people and buildings displaced and discarded in its wake.

In the third section, I'll pry apart these portmanteaus to clarify how a particular relationship to demolition and repair is naturalized. I argue that an ideology of improvement is insufficient to legitimize redevelopment; to foreclose the possibility of repair and justify demolition, an ideology of obsolescence is also essential. Looking closely at the case of Alma Blackwell, I demonstrate how the building was justified as obsolete on the basis of a local historical failure—the Leaky Condo Crisis—now rearing its head. I argue that the content of this past crisis has been hollowed out into a misnomer—quite literally, the condos were rotting not leaking—and that by re-reading the specific material of its history, obsolescence (and with it demolition) can be seen as anything but inevitable.

### **3.1 The renoviction loophole**

In the mid 2000s, tenants living on Vancouver's West End began getting served eviction notices. Their landlords told them the units were in desperate need of renovations, which required them to be vacated. But many of these tenants had lived in their homes for decades, and they questioned the claim. Perhaps renovations were needed, even welcomed in some cases, but couldn't they be done without vacating the premises? Some tenants even offered to vacate so long as they could return when the work was complete. The landlords refused these offers. It became clear to tenants that a renovated and improved property wasn't the end goal. Renovation was a means to evict in order to hike rents to capture market value ("land lift").

In 2004, a coalition called Renters at Risk was formed by West End tenants, and with it a dogged seven-year campaign to resist their evictions. Groups of tenants took their particular

landlords to court. Protests and press conferences were held. By 2009, hundreds of people living in West End buildings had “been evicted or threatened with eviction, only to be pushed into a rental market that, at last report by Canada’s Mortgage and Housing Corporation, had a 0.5 per cent vacancy rate and some of the highest rents in Canada” (Renters at Risk [2009](#)).

In mid 2008, at a press conference, a tenant coined the term “renoviction” to both describe and critique this new tactic of eviction “under the guise of doing renovations, either real or merely cosmetic” to in fact raise the rent (Howell 2008). With the new buzzword (or “buzz-saw,” as one tenant put it), the sizeable tenant coalition on the West End began ‘making the news’ more. “Renoviction” was enfolded “with relish” by the press into The Talk Of The Town, and was met with swift condemnation from some city and provincial officials who sided with renters in condemning the new landlord practice (Renters at Risk 2008).

After reading the archived Renters at Risk blog, the news stories, case transcripts, and public statements surrounding the West End renovictions, another older compound term began to stand out right next to the new portmanteau. “Democrats are going to change the *loopholes* in the Tenancy Act and fix it so that renovictions don’t occur,” said NDP Leader Carole James (Matas 2009, emphasis mine). “Unfortunately the balance has been tipped ... and we now have landlords *manipulating these loopholes* to drive renters out on the premise of renovation and jacking up rents after the fact,” said then-candidate for mayor Greg Robertson. One tenant activist, Christine Ackerman, used the same frame : “Some developers are trying to turn the West End into Yaletown through ‘renovictions’. *We need to close the loopholes* and take away these kinds of business tactics from the bad developers” (Renters at Risk 2009). The language eventually made it to the Supreme Court, into the mouth of the judge who sided with the West End tenants in the first renoviction case in the province:

Practically speaking, if the tenant is willing to empty the unit for the duration of the renovations, then an end to the tenancy is not required. It is irrational to think that s. 49(6) could be used by a landlord to evict tenants because a very brief period was required for a renovation in circumstances where the tenant agreed to vacate the premises for that period of time. *It could not have been the intent of the legislature to provide such a “loophole” for landlords* (Berry and Kloet v. British Columbia 2007: s.23, emphasis mine).

The ‘loophole’ here can be understood as the (metaphorical) frame of the ‘renoviction’. And in one way, this framing makes a lot of practical sense. It was a particular section within the Residential Tenancy Act (RTA) that landlords were using to evict tenants on these false pretenses; and thus it was this section that must change for the tactic to be barred. The metaphor of the loophole problematizes with precision the lawful site of this language and offers with clarity a solution. Indeed, when in 2021 after a long-fought battle the BC parliament amended the RTA to ban renoviction tactics, it was exactly and exclusively the loophole that was plugged.

But from a more structural perspective, this framing was impractical because it delimited the critique into a narrow hole blind to its broader contexts and entanglements. That is, in this original moment of renoviction, the loophole frame became unseen, unquestioned, and almost singular—the hegemonic discursive form upon which the renoviction could be acted. Indeed, I wonder whether part of the reason the renoviction could be so swiftly condemned by a state which typically defends private property, is because *only* as a loophole, could the threat of the renoviction be enclosed and removed without challenging the broader institution.

Let me elaborate. As a loophole, the story of the renoviction is evacuated of much historical and present material contexts. Attention is directed into a problem/solution framework. The call for justice becomes a call exclusively for plugging the hole. And to hyperfix on fixing the “glitch” in the original code makes the realm of the law the first (and dominating) stage through which this property relation is seen. The point here then is to show how the metaphor of



the loophole—a word that originally comes from the world of architectural fortification—helps to bound and enclose the imaginative geography/space with which property relations exists. Just like the “narrow vertical opening, usually widening inwards” which feudal lords “cut in a wall or other defence, to allow the passage of missiles,” the metaphorical loophole funnels the ‘renoviction’ through a narrow slit in the text (“loophole” n1). We can almost see this physical slit on the page in the amendment to the Residential Tenancy Act; on the list of six uses that permit a landlord to “end a tenancy” without cause, what used to read,

(b) renovate or repair the rental unit in a manner that requires the rental unit to be vacant;

(b) [Repealed 2021-1-13.]

Renovation now has its own expanded section below (RTA 2023: s.49.2), clarifying any ambiguity or omission that a clever landlord might exploit to subvert the intention of the original language. Tenants won it would seem, the loophole was plugged.

But if the metaphor of the loophole works to enclose the political horizon of a problem, it also might expand the political imagination. What if you could hide a bomb in the plug? Suddenly I’m rewatching the battle scene from Lord of the Rings (2002), when the torch-bearing Ork runs down the central file of troops towards the unseen loophole at the base of the wall and, despite multiple arrows piercing his body, ignites a bomb set in the hollow that explodes what seemed an unimpeachable fortress. Does property law have a similar loophole still unseen at its base? One that would cause its internal contradictions to breach with force into the open? Might there be loopholes for tenants to manipulate too? And more, could a loophole be hidden in an

amendment to the Residential Tenancy Act, within which a bomb might be lit when the moment is right? I'm curious though doubtful (I am still not the heroic ork), and perhaps this little creative exercise is more to make explicit the obvious: "loopholes" in the law are not distributed or used equitably between landlords and tenants. In Ontario for instance, a different loophole in the residential tenancy act has allowed landlords to evict tenants to move in family members easily (Dingman 2019). Today's landlords are not merely more "clever" than tenants at finding and exploiting opaque language; it was a lineage of propertied men before them who impressed such opacity onto the text of law.

To be clear, intention is beside the point here. And it's important that the loophole is not seen as manufactured exclusively by the press or politicians as some doubly clever piece of rhetoric. To imagine an organized backroom of power players here (in which the technology of the renoviction and/or frame of the 'renoviction' was invented and manufactured as a planned conspiracy) is a neat fantasy that mystifies the messy and contradictory ways property relations are formed with material conditions (more on these shortly). As noted, the Renters At Risk coalition, also deployed the loophole frame consistently.<sup>9</sup> And more importantly, to frame the renoviction as a loophole is tricky. Is what we're dealing with, a "glitch in the formulation of a law" used to "subvert its [original] purpose" (Katz 2010: 2)? Or is the loophole the opposite of an accident? Is it the typical outcome to the game of language played within the realm of (property) law: biggest owner wins.

The loophole, then, does not exist (metaphysically?) until the conditions on the ground incentivize its creation. Renoviction does not exist as a creative technique of private property and

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<sup>9</sup> Relevant article headlines on the blog include: "Risky Business – Closing Eviction Loophole"; "Landlords' loophole and its effects on tenants"; "Landlords accused of using loophole to hike rents

accumulation until some shift in the material conditions of redevelopment spurs its creative construction by a group of landlords. One key shift, pointed to by Renters at Risk, was rent control regulation. In 2004, the BC Liberals had substantially amended the RTA, including a 4% annual cap on rent increases. But as a volunteer organizer with the Vancouver Tenants Union explained, these market controls had become re-uncontrolled by the market itself because of the way rent control policy in BC was tied to the lease (rather than the unit itself, as we'll see tenants eventually advocated for). "Because of the different controls we have in B.C., landlords are seeing that the rents are capped, but the market rates are skyrocketing. And *so they have an incentive* to get those rent-controlled tenants out for the tenant turnover" (Renters at Risk 2011).

With the lease null, the evicted tenant was no longer protected under the RTA, providing the landlord with the lawful ability to return the property to the private market, where it could be locked in a higher rent. The renovation clause in the RTA was not flawed from the moment of inscription, then, as the loophole frame claims. The 'hole' through which the law became exploitable 'opened' as the rent gap between market and control widened. The ruthless increase of the market inspired the creation of a new creative technique of profit maximization. Contrary to the Supreme Court judge's imaginative history that "It could not have been the intent of the legislature to provide such a 'loophole' for landlords," the *incentive* of the BC legislature continues to be riddled with the contradictions of a state claiming to uphold private property and its housing mandate simultaneously (though by no means equally).

Through the critique of the renoviction, Renters at Risk challenged this lawful process of redevelopment by calling into question the way the RTA "unjustly favour(s) landlords over tenants" (Renters at Risk 2018). More than closing the loophole, they pushed for an amendment that would add a "Right to Return" clause. A similar law had passed in Ontario, the idea being

such a protection would make eviction more like temporary displacement. And in 2017, they succeeded in getting passed an anti-renoviction law that included the "right to first refusal." But ironically, the new law came with its own loophole. Though landlords now are required to offer the new redeveloped units to the evicted tenants, they could do so at new increased rents. In a submission to a Rental Coalition Taskforce, the coalition noted that unlike in other jurisdictions, the right to return in BC "fails to prevent unrestricted rent increases upon returning to a unit, *which essentially is the current status quo*" (Ibid. 2018). In other words, the right to return was a hollow protection, unusable by most tenants, including those at Alma Blackwell.

### **3.2 The demoviction process**

Around 2012, as the wave of evictions on the West End was cresting, to the south east a new wave of evictions was picking up in Burnaby. New condos were going up fast in Metrotown. Between 2012 and 2015, over 500 rental units were demolished, with numbers increasing each year. In 2015, a coalition of tenant organizations formed and launched a campaign called Stop Demovictions Burnaby.<sup>11</sup> As one activist put it on a day of province-wide protest in 2016, "We call it demovictions, which is where tenants get evicted so that the building can be demolished to build high-rise condos" (*The Province 2016*). A definition was extrapolated in a 2016 report by the coalition, which doubled as a case study: A single square block of 15 rental buildings had been bought up by two developers, who were planning to raze and replace them all with condos (Alliance Against Displacement 2016).

The eviction of hundreds of working class people, pensioners, low-income residents, and refugee families from Dunblane appears natural in this process – a byproduct of the "redevelopment" of another Metrotown neighbourhood, the inevitable fallout of progress.

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<sup>11</sup> The coalition was made up of three groups: Alliance Against Displacement, ACORN Burnaby, and Metrotown Residents Association. There is something to be said here about the ephemerality of these tenant groups.

But...as Burnaby City Hall orchestrates the demoviction of Metrotown apartments through spot rezonings and development corporations pile up their profits, vulnerable renter communities are pushed out of their neighbourhoods. We are calling this process demoviction: the eviction by demolition of an entire community (Ibid. 5).

Though the coinage here was undoubtedly inspired by the renoviction, its remarkable that nowhere in the report or any news article I read, did any tenant activist draw an explicit line between theirs and the West End movement, just 14 kilometers away and at that point less than a decade old. Why was the link never made? And what about an older history of demolition? I don't know how much inter-movement politics played a role here, and to find out would require interviews with some of the former members of these tenant coalitions.<sup>12</sup> But more importantly, I think the clear yet implicit connection between the tenant movements points to the complexity of their inter-relationship. On their face, the demoviction and renoviction would seem like they were born of the same conditions: in both cases, the evictions are legalized under the same section 49 of the RTA ("landlord uses of property"). On the list of reasons a landlord can use to end a tenancy, demolition is (a) above and renovation is (b) above. Together, they are the two primary processes of redevelopment. And when blended with the eviction, both the renoviction and demoviction are discursive critiques that attempt to name something new about the way urbanization is working.

And yet, unlike the rise of the renoviction, the demoviction was never framed as a "loophole" by tenants, politicians, or the press; the demoviction is a "process," as the coalition writes (or a "technology" as its since has been theorized). Where the renoviction's *loophole frame* worked in the West End to clarify a problem and obscure its underlying conditions, the

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<sup>12</sup> Indeed, more research is needed on the fractured constellation of tenant organizing. The spatial and temporal relations between such groups is structured in Vancouver, and much of the world, by the long-standing illegality of tenant collective bargaining. For an insightful history of the Residential Tenancy Act, and how the City of Vancouver ended up siding with landlords surrounding the question of collective bargaining, see Jon (2020).

demoviction's *process frame* worked in Burnaby to clarify a problem by drawing out its underlying conditions. That is, while both portmanteaus are articulations of literal processes, the characterization of only the demoviction as an explicit process orients the critique not around a problematic exceptionality, but instead around a problematic status-quo.

In a basic way then, the demoviction is more complicated and controversial to talk about than the renoviction. Indeed, this is likely why the demoviction at least in part has not found the same traction in the press or at city hall. For instance, compared to the renoviction which was hotly debated in the BC legislature and eventually amended (ineffectively) into the RTA, the demoviction has been mentioned just once in the legislature (as we'll soon see), and there is no discussion of amending an anti-demoviction law to the RTA. To the contrary, in 2016 Burnaby's director of planning responded to Stop Demovictions Burnaby with a 65-page report that rebutted the group's "assertions to be generally unsupported" and "containing numerous factual errors" (Burnaby 2016: 40). The local press has also written less about the demoviction than the renoviction.

Indeed, unlike the renovictions, the demovictions happening in Burnaby were not spurred by clever landlords using the law against its supposed intention; the demolitions were happening because of an intended change in the city's zoning bylaw. The demovictions—until resisted and named by tenants—was just the way redevelopment happened. Though "scarcely noticed" when it passed, the 2010 amendment institutionalized an entire new category of zoning in Burnaby. Officially named "Supplementary Community Benefit Bonus Density," or (still officially) "'s' zoning" for short, the new policy expanded Burnaby's density bonus program by targeting and upzoning areas around a planned new Skytrain line.

This form of transit-oriented development is underpinned by a tactic and discourse of densification—and together make up a key strategy of urbanization chosen by cities around the world. Increasing density is seen as a reasonable and fair way to make a more livable, affordable and sustainable urban form. But this claim to impartiality and universal practicality is complicated by a closer look at the relationships that underpin the logics of transit-oriented density bonusing. There are at least three important relational dyads active around this densification program: (1) tenant and landlord; (2) municipal government and private developer (city and developer); and (3) people and building. While it's the curious third relation that is the focus of this chapter, the first two help to contextualize how the politics of participation and property play out unevenly within the process of transit-oriented density bonusing.

(1) Historically, scholarship on urban renewal in the 1960s has shown how the destruction of low-income neighborhoods was not a natural or an unfortunate byproduct of freeway infrastructure development (See Chapter 1). The “best” routes were not the best by some objective, scientific measure of commutability but the best because they simultaneously avoided “good” neighborhoods and fixed the bad ones by demolishing them. Homeowners were protected at the expense of renters. And it would seem that this tendency to protect homeowners and expend renters in the face of infrastructure development—did not die with the formal end of urban renewal. In Coquitlam, a recent study by Jones (2019) about transit-oriented development highlights how homeowners are entitled and provided with a slower planning consultation process compared to renters who have been evicted en-masse by demolitions. “The fact that these changes largely displaced the most vulnerable, including low-income people of color, is consistent with the burgeoning literature on TOD-induced gentrification” (Ibid. 15).

(2) The density bonus policy is also predicated and justified on a certain way of seeing public-private partnerships. In a case study on Vancouver, Hyde (2021) argues that planners and politicians consistently frame density bonus policy as a gift, contribution, offering, and donation *by* the private sector. “CACs are a gift from a developer that is asking for an up-zone, as a former deputy mayor of Vancouver put it. In Burnaby, the 2010 amendment states that zoning will help with “securing *contributions* to provide for needed community amenities” (Burnaby 2011). And yet, as Hyde argues, the philanthropic benevolence implied by this relational theory “conceals the negative effects of the privatization of affordable housing provision by making social welfare contingent on increasing profit for developers” (Hyde 2021: 3). Building off the work of Mauss, Polanyi, and Bourdieu, Hyde argues that the gift of the density bonus can “operate by creating a fuzzy, incalculable relationship between the giver and receiver that are often heightened by a delay between exchange and reciprocity.”

This fuzziness can be seen even in the way the gift was discursively constructed in Burnaby. In a 2017 rezoning application for a 38-storey condo in MetroTown, the developer writes: “As a part of our development we will be proposing a *contribution* to fund transit passes for residents, to provide two secured bicycle spaces per residential unit, to provide some Level 2 EV charging stations, and to purchase and ‘gift’ two electric vehicles to the future strata” (Burnaby 2017, [quotes in original](#)). What exactly the intention of these air-quotes isn’t clear to me, but they certainly work to draw attention, and demonstrate a certain self-consciousness and linguistic awareness on the part of the developer. The quotes perhaps are saying, ‘We know this isn’t *actually* a gift’, and thus in the context of a multi-million-dollar transaction foreclose a second reading of a bribe/graft. And yet, I would argue that simultaneously, the air-quoted “gift”



also opens the text explicitly to this second reading, or at least the awareness of its possibility. Simultaneously, it would seem, the gift is made to exist and not exist.

Together, these two relations make clear how densification and transit-oriented development collaborate to erase the particular social relations that imbue their form. It's helpful that density itself attempts to visualize space as an empty container to be measured and filled; with people, but the chief objects of its bonus vision are stories, units, amenities, and floor space areas (see chapter 1). In the Burnaby 2010 's' zoning amendment, this construction of space is evident in the absence of any description of the targeted districts, its buildings, and the people that live in them. The amendment itself has nothing to say about the present conditions on the ground. It's almost as if the process of redevelopment is discursively skipped and supplanted by the future object of redevelopment. *Almost*, because as we've noted, these were the exact conditions the tenant movement in Burnaby worked to draw out and challenge.

These neighborhoods are made up of low-wage workers, new and long-time immigrant families, persons receiving income or disability assistance, refugees, and many others who make up the bulk of the city's lowest income earners (Alliance Against Displacement 2016: 13).

Jones and Ley historicize the living conditions of these groups of tenants further by pointing out they are "clinging" to affordable housing built under a bygone welfare state. "With social justice now submerged beneath neoliberal imperatives, these tax-incentive rental units are *trapped* in an endgame where market ideologies are prevalent" (2016, emphasis mine). Crosby too, one of the few scholars to theorize the demoviction, calls it a "neoliberal technology of creative destruction." Through a case study of an affordable housing complex in Toronto, he argues the demoviction is a "distinct tactic" that "signals a longer-term investment strategy of intensification involving the sociospatial restructuring of neighbourhoods and communities" (2020: 184).

I find this historical frame both essential and insufficient. Perhaps nowhere more than in the realm of housing has neoliberal governance been more successful at devastating the welfare state. In Canada (and the United States), the complete federal defunding and devolution of public housing for a quarter century has left municipalities with few good choices today. In Burnaby, the barriers of this neoliberal policy environment was a “conundrum” for the progressive NDP-controlled government. In a lengthy excerpt from a frank interview conducted with Jones and Ley, an anonymous NDP official related how the government had been resisting the redevelopment of these neighborhoods for decades, had spent a lot of time and money studying the problem, but eventually was forced into “accepting the inevitable” (Jones and Ley 2020).

We can't hold back the sea of change...[just] because we thought that the people in there should somehow be protected from that reality. Because we were no longer doing them any favours as there was such a downturn in the quality of housing that they were turning into firetraps, rat-traps and it was not going well (Ibid.).

Without adequate funding to maintain and repair its housing stock, the official said the only way to protect tenants from eviction would have been to “freeze the area” from any upzoning; and yet the problem with this strategy is that in effect then “you ghettoize it.” And it's here that we can begin to see at work the third curious relation surrounding urban density: people and building. Turning houses into a trap, area into ghetto, the official points to a policy perception that “deteriorating housing quality would lead to deteriorating social conditions” (Jones and Ley 2016). This perception, here propelled by the anthimeria “ghettoize,” conjures the specter of the 19th century Victorian slum—its filth (rats) and danger (fire)—that continues to animate density today. In Chapter 1, I argued such vivid descriptions of housing waste (metonymized in the slum) works to charge the discursive process of (property) redevelopment with moral and emotional force that moves with a particular way of envisioning (seeing and experiencing) the conditions/situation/problem.

For the rest of this chapter, I turn to the seemingly boring language of building “quality” and the naturalized process of its downturn. Because the threat of the slum or ghetto combined with the reward of density are not typically sufficient to justify redevelopment. At least not any more. Demolition must also be justified, which means the building must be dis-qualified of value and re-qualified as waste. An ideology of improvement then, at least in the realm of property development, also sometimes demands an *ideology of obsolescence (or decay)*. If density works to legitimize the general force of redevelopment, obsolescence works to legitimize its particular form.

### **3.3. Making leakiness a ‘matter of fact’**

The English-language concept of obsolescence was first applied to the built environment around the turn of the 20th century. This was a moment of intensive redevelopment, where buildings were coming down and going up at such a fast clip that sometimes they would be torn down before they were even completed, just to be built back bigger. As early as 1895, builders and insurance companies were producing “life-span charts,” which offered detailed range estimates for the variety of materials that made up a building as well the types of buildings themselves. As David Abramson argues, these charts turned obsolescence into a science of sorts, and thus helped bring “order to the built environment.” The precise objectification of a building in the measurement of its life-span offered “reassurance in a world of risk and uncertainty,” and helped make sense of a chaotic world “by giving a name and logic to the seemingly irrational process of capitalist disinvestment and reinvestment” (Abramson 2016: 31).

As obsolescence instantiated itself as science, it was also critiqued. The idea that a rental building should last 40 or 50 years at most was not *essentially or only* an objective and inevitable

assessment of some natural process of decay and innovation. Obsolescence, critics argued, could be mitigated, a structure's life-span extended, as long as particular techniques of building, maintenance, and repair were adhered to. As a real estate assessor put it in 1936, "To use standardized tables for the measurement of obsolescence...is like putting your faith in the oracles of Delphi" (quoted in Abramson 2016: 34).

And yet today, a naturalized and inevitable process of obsolescence remains powerful ideology in housing discourse. In Burnaby, the majority of the building stock rezoned for redevelopment in 2011 was built in the 1960s and 1970s, making it between 40 and 50 years old at the time of demolition. Though tenants argued the affordability offered by their existing housing in the Town Center should be protected, the city of Burnaby countered by emphasizing the old age and thus deteriorating stock. "While these existing units may provide a measure of affordable housing within the Town Centre, *like many buildings that are nearing the end of their life-cycle*, they are advanced for redevelopment based on market conditions, and as it becomes increasingly uneconomic to continue to repair and maintain older building stock as they age" (Burnaby 2013, quoted in Jones and Ley 2016). Articulated in the life-span or cycle, obsolescence simultaneously gives and takes life from a building; it plans its lifetime before its built, obsolescence science became the discursive rationalization of redevelopment via demolition.

And yet, while obsolescence worked to justify the demovictions in Burnaby because the stock was reaching the end of its 40-50 years of life, in East Vancouver, as noted earlier, Alma Blackwell was just 34 years old when ENF announced its plans to redevelop the building. Tenants had emphasized this point from the start, and had been trying for over a year to get then Housing Minister (and now BC Premiere) David Eby to publicly comment on the redevelopment. In January

2022, Eby finally responded to a letter about the redevelopment from Jenny Kwan, an NDP MP for East Vancouver who tenants had met with. Despite the young age of the building, he nonetheless argued, similar to the city of Burnaby, that the building was “nearing the end of its life and would require significant renovations in order to continue operation” (Daya and McSheffrey 2022). How could a building be nearing the end of its life prematurely?

A month later, at the BC legislative assembly, Eby offered a rationale while taking a question from Pete Milobar, a Liberal MLA from Kamloops, who had recently met with Alma Blackwell tenants. It was the first time the demoviction was ever spoken aloud on the debate floor of the BC assembly (BC Assembly 2022).

Milobar: ...The NDP are demovicting another 46 families from the Alma Blackwell residence in Vancouver through their own community housing fund....These families say that after the affordable housing they live in is demolished, the NDP are going to rent it back to them at twice the price, at \$3,250 per month. Why is this minister demovicting families with kids...and doubling their...rents?

Without repeating it, Eby disputes the frame by laying out in concise succession three key interlocking arguments used to justify not only the redevelopment of Alma Blackwell, but the dominant process of housing redevelopment in the city.

Eby: The families have a right to return at rent geared to income. That is fair. We are doubling the number of affordable housing units on the site. That is better than they (the Liberal Party) ever did. And we are redeveloping a building that is a leaky condo from 1986, in partnership with a private housing society...It can't be kept. (BC Assembly 2022)

Before we hone in on the curious third—the “leaky condo”— briefly on the other two: First, this is not an eviction Eby argues, but a “fair” relocation in which tenants have the right to return, and which rents will be geared to income. This is true, consistent with the conditions prior to redevelopment, and in accordance with the law as it stand. But as we’ve seen though, the right to return was first advocated in Vancouver by Renters at Risk on the West End, during their

movement to close the renoviction loophole in the RTA. And when the law was eventually added to the RTA in 2017, the West End tenant coalition realized that it came with its own loophole.

Second, Eby argues the development project is justified because it will double the affordable units on site. Such a quantitative argument, which ENF and its private consultant explicitly articulated (see Chapter 2), is underpinned by a narrow logic of improvement: That is, improvement is understood as first and foremost a Benthamite-utilitarian matter of units added; qualitative questions, say about power relations between tenants and landlords reproduced through the redevelopment process and crystallized within the form of the new product, are treated as second-tier concerns compared to the imperative to increase the housing supply. Together, these two arguments work to challenge the demoviction's rhetorical claim to eviction, to the destruction of community, and creation of biopolitical waste. But it's only the third argument that refutes the demoviction's other half—its rhetorical critique of demolition and creation of material waste.

When Eby says the building “can't be kept” because it's a “leaky condo,” he is making a qualitative and literal argument for the building's obsolescence, as well as an historical one. In the early 1990s, widespread reports from around British Columbia began streaming in of substantial water ingress damage to wood-frame buildings—especially condos, all of which were barely a decade old. In 1996, the provincial government took notice and formed a task group, which led to a commission in 1998, headed by Dave Barrett, a former premier and federal MP. The Barrett Commission held public hearings, received some 700 written submissions, and wrote two reports investigating the “leaky condo problem.” In 1999, as insurance claims continued wracking up, the province's New Home Warranty (NHW) program went bankrupt sending “shockwaves throughout a home building industry that was already under heavy fire from media exposure and public

inquiry” (Vert 2008: 80). At a news conference following the bankruptcy, Barrett called the situation "a crisis of unprecedented proportions” of which he had never encountered “in terms of the magnitude of devastation to ordinary people” (Mickleburgh [2000](#)) But even Barrett’s recommendation for a \$900 million-dollar bailout was off by a factor of four: today damage in BC is estimated around \$4 billion dollars, spanning some 31,000 units across 900 buildings.

Even before bankruptcy, the press had dubbed the problem the "leaky condo crisis.” And it doggedly kept up with the story for a decade as new revelations were uncovered. In 2011 though, despite tens of thousands of units still needing repair, the leaky condo crisis almost vanished from the newspapers.<sup>13</sup> Without elaborating the material conditions (especially the profit motive) that structure the ephemeral myopia of the news cycle, I’m interested in the effects of this fractured attention upon its present re-articulation in the case of Alma Blackwell, as proof of premature obsolescence and justification for demolition.

David Eby wasn’t the first to describe Alma Blackwell as a leaky condo. During tenants’ 2021 relocation info session, ENF and the private consulting agency it had hired to help facilitate the redevelopment process (see Chapter 2) had used the phrase, like Eby, to answer a question about how such a young building could be demolished, justify obsolescence and thus demolition. I include the question and answer in full because they offer a strong articulation of how obsolescence is historicized through the leaky condo crisis to justify demolition.

PRIVATE CONSULTANT 1: ...So one person is just wondering, what they’re saying is: ‘The building life span should be 40 to 50 years, you know even for a building built in the 80s. Why is the building lifespan (of Alma Blackwell) so short?’ That’s a good question.

NONPROFIT DIRECTOR: It is. And that’s an absolute correct assumption that it should be 50 years. I think what we’ve seen with this building, due to some of the construction practices back when it was built, it doesn’t meet current standards. And some of the construction practices were not done particularly well. And that’s referring to the, you

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<sup>13</sup> From 1998–2010, the phrase “leaky condo crisis” appeared in the BC press close to 5,000 times. Between 2011 and the end of 2022, it appeared just over 150 times (Newspapers.com)

know, the water ingress issues, and some of the sloping and things like that on the building. *It just wasn't constructed very well at the time.* So that's unfortunately where we sit.

PRIVATE CONSULTANT 2: And currently, the standards and requirements for building envelope design (wall assemblies, exterior, interior)—there is such stringent standards of testing and design and third-party approvals, and especially for BC housing...And also just generally, building code expectations today, it is completely different than the 1980s. *I mean, I'm sure you're all aware of the Leaky Condo Crisis, I think we've come a long way.* And unfortunately, a number of buildings have had some serious failures. And this building is desperately in need of repairs. So I think *that's part of just the construction time and era that it was built.*

Together, the nonprofit director and private consultant (and housing minister) frame the leaky condo crisis as an unfortunate moment of a bygone “time and era,” when construction practices were poor. This understanding is in line with the official assessment and response to the crisis. In 1998, the Barrett Commission concluded the crisis was caused by misinterpretations of the building codes and design and construction errors. And over the early 2000s, all levels of government implemented the commission’s recommendations to change buildings codes and create new regulatory safeguards, including mandatory warranty insurance, new rainscreen technology, and a new kind of expert called building envelope consultants (Ransford 2015: G7).

But this dominant understanding and response to the leaky condo crisis is less an objective or close reading of history than an ideological retelling. We can actually see hints of this imaginative oversimplification in the director and consultant’s subtle and parallel use of qualifiers: “It *just* wasn’t constructed very well at the time,”; “So I think that’s part of *just* the construction time and era.” The confident assumption of “I’m sure you’re all aware” sweeps away any question or reservation before it can arise, and turns the leaky condo crisis into a simple and obvious fact, one which would be embarrassing *not* to know. But the leaky condo crisis is not just from another time and era, nor is it just a black mark of construction malpractice



unfortunately now finally showing its head. Actually, the leaky condo crisis is not at all like it seems.

To start, the name is a misnomer. For one, as the earliest 1996 report of the crisis noted, “construction deficiencies are not inherently linked to the condominium form of ownership. Similar problems have arisen in all types of low-rise, multi-unit, wood-frame, stucco-clad buildings” (HRCS 1996: 1, quoted in Vert 2005: 76). And for another, and more importantly, I had imagined a leaky condo (and I’m assuming I’m not the only one) meant rain coming through the roof or walls. But this isn’t right. The main problem was not a leak from water ingress damaging the building from the outside in, but moisture trapped in the wood frame, rotting and molding the building from the inside out. Contrary to the Barrett Commission, independent engineer Ken Dextras argues in his 2002 bestseller *The Leaky Condo Boondoggle* that the fundamental problem was not bad implementation of the national building codes, but the codes themselves, which had been changed in 1985 to create air-tight wall cavities to prevent heat loss. Specifically, a sheet of plastic called a “vapor barrier” was added between the insulation and interior wall, which made new homes 70 times more air-tight than older homes (Dextras 2002). This improved heat retention in much of Canada, but in rainy and humid Vancouver, even small amounts of moisture trapped inside the wall cavity now had no way to exfoliate, spawning mold growth and rot. “All woodframe buildings ‘breathe’ (expand and contract), and all ‘leak’ (Spratt 2002, paraphrased in Vert 2005). The problem was not a leak, but rather the lack of a leak. Not water ingress, but egress. *Too* many holes had been plugged. More accurate a name would have been the moldy (or asphyxiated) condo crisis.

In October 2005, Patrick Vert published a fascinating thesis that built off Dextra’s technical research by tracing the political-economic origins of the leaky condo crisis to another

crisis—the 1973 OPEC Oil Crisis. Citing a 1992 CMHC report (unnoticed by the press perhaps because of its dry title: “Moisture in Canadian Wood-Frame House Construction: Problems, Research and Practice from 1975-1991”)—Vert demonstrates that the federal government was “fully aware” as early as 1975 that “sealing up the wall cavity might trap moisture and also knew that this risk was greater for coastal BC (Vert 2005: 18).” According to the CHMHC report,

The single most significant factor influencing building research, technology and practice for more than a decade, beginning in 1975, was the [OPEC] energy crisis....In the government programs that followed, aimed at security of supply and self-sufficiency, energy used for buildings (both existing and new) was a primary target for conservation...Energy programs were given one of the highest priorities by the government and...were generally results-oriented and prepared to take risks to achieve objectives (Wilson 1992: 14)

A month after Vert published his thesis, Conservative MP John Cummings obtained some additional documents through a Freedom of Information request and shared them with the press. “Fed tried to hide complicity in leaky condo crisis”; “Fed deny leaky-condo ‘smoking gun’” (O’Neil 2005: A1; also see Lazaruk 2005: A11). In a 1981 letter from then CMHC president, Ray Hession, which Cummins gave to the press, Hession expressed concern that the stringent energy-efficiency measures made because of OPEC would “...face up to the reality” that new building code and construction practices would “in fact, increase the hazard of moisture-induced structural damage.” The federal government “knew that the building code was the cause” of the leaky condos, Cummings is quoted saying in the article (Ibid.).

And yet, nothing came of this “smoking gun.” A renewed push by the Homeowners Association to get the crisis designated a “disaster” in order to unlock federal funding was never taken up. And while Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper did commit in an election speech at the end of 2005 to review the federal government’s role in the crisis, his government reneged after winning, arguing it would “not be appropriate” to review the crisis while there was

ongoing litigation between condo owners and CMHC (O’Neil\_2006: B5). In 2009, after the Supreme Court ruled against a group of tenants

So what to make of this fleshed out, “forgotten” history today? In the case of Alma Blackwell, we can see how the invocation of the “leaky condo crisis” works to simultaneously prove obsolescence as fact and obviate questions prompted by its more complicated story. The contradictory political history of the crisis is *reified* by the developer and housing officials into what seem like objective, inevitable fact. “For people in power, the reification sleight of hand is very useful because it conveniently abracadabras questions like ‘Who caused this thing?’ and ‘Who benefits?’ out of sight (Carr 2022). We can see how this magic trick is constructed with language: The building’s premature obsolescence is “just” an unfortunate historical mistake of another “time and era” of which we are supposedly “sure(ly) all aware.” Such a theorization of history, produced in part through a news cycle of textual erasure, lobotomizes past from present. The “leaky condo crisis” becomes an empty signifier that helps to justify a particular form of redevelopment. Through a constructed distance of bygone time, history is turned into historical allusion, evacuated of its own content. Content, which now revealed, in fact complicates the chief objective of its articulation.

Indeed, only by refilling this concept with its historical content did I notice what now looks like an obvious question: Why hadn’t ENF repaired the building envelope back in the 2000s, while the leaky condo crisis was a front-page story, and a government program was in effect to fund such repairs? In fact, ENF *did* make significant renovations to Alma Blackwell over the past decade. According to documents I obtained through Freedom of Information requests, ENF applied for and received a \$300,000 forgivable loan in 2010 from the BCHMC under its Building Envelope Program (ENF 2010). And according to a building assessment

report commissioned by ENF in 2019 and obtained through Freedom of Information requests made by tenants, the nonprofit had used at least some of the funds to replace the roof of the entire complex in 2010; and in 2014, it also made “partial” building envelope repairs (Zavosh Consulting 2019: 6). I was unable to confirm ENF’s rationale for these partial renovations, but undoubtedly \$300,000 was insufficient to repair the complex’s entire building envelope. In 2019, the consulting firm estimated Alma Blackwell needed \$2.75 million dollars in renovations, mostly to replace the entire building envelope.

What to make of this patchy history of repair? From a wider angle, it offers evidence of the neoliberal policy environment, which it must be remembered, was rolling out as the leaky condo crisis was playing out. Not only had funding for new public housing development been cut entirely, but so had sufficient funding for maintenance and repairs. By the government’s own analysis in 2011, at least a quarter of buildings identified with prematurely failing envelopes hadn’t been repaired by the time the program was ended in 2010. And in 2015, the Vancouver Sun forewarned a “second leaky condo crisis” on the horizon, as these unprepared buildings approached 40-50 years of age. From this angle, ENF’s partial and mostly failed repairs might read less as evidence of its own incompetence as a housing provider than of a nonprofit working within the severe constraints of a disinvested housing sector. From this angle, Alma Blackwell’s leakiness was not only justification of its premature obsolescence, but also the failure to actually avoid such a premature outcome.

And yet, it’s notable that tenants don’t take up this neoliberal critique to challenge the characterization of Alma Blackwell as a ‘leaky condo’—at least not explicitly. Rhetorically, this makes sense: Landing and leaning too heavily on such a hierarchical and abstracted theorization of housing devolution would be of little practical benefit to a group of tenants resisting a singular

redevelopment. In fact, such a rhetorical emphasis might hurt their critique because it could displace perceived responsibility and agency from their nonprofit landlord to higher levels of government, where they have much less recourse. Indeed, the critique of neoliberal housing devolution is a refrain more used by housing providers and municipalities, not tenants, as we saw in the case of the NDP government in Burnaby to justify the mass redevelopment by demoviction.

Rather, through the critique of the demoviction, Alma Blackwell tenants kept their focus narrowed on ENF by challenging the choice and process of demolition itself, which they argue is economically unjustified. As we've seen, tenants emphasized how ENF, despite their claims, never actually proved demolition was cheaper than repair; the nonprofit had refused to share a cost analysis, despite repeated requests. For some tenants, this lack of transparency made them more suspicious that ENF's non-profiteering intentions were not as pure as claimed. During a meeting with the Grandview Woodland Neighborhood Council in April 2021, a tenant who lived in Alma Blackwell since it was built in 1985 tied these material, economic and moral threads of demolition together.

And these outsiders are coming in, almost like Americans went into Afghanistan with just about the same effect because they want to demolish. Demolish is a terrible word when you think about it. It not only takes apart wood and metal and separates them but it breaks your soul. When the place where you have thrived doesn't exist anymore. When the tree that you planted that's already in the alleyway in the backyard. And it's now three storeys high...There was a time when we the tenants owned this building. And then it was prostituted through the banks to buy mortgages for other buildings. They would have nothing without Alma Blackwell.

Though I wasn't able to prove this claim, it is true that in 2010, the same year that ENF began to make "partial" repairs to Alma Blackwell, the nonprofit also embarked on its biggest

expansion, mostly by agglomerating properties from smaller, struggling housing Societies (see Chapter 2).

To be clear, I don't mean to imply that knowing all this history, or obtaining a cost analysis and other internal documents, would have spared Alma Blackwell the bulldozer—nor even necessarily that it should have. Even if ENF or Eby had aired out a more nuanced history of Alma Blackwell's leakiness, including how it was catalyzed in the cross currents of decades of housing disinvestment and a global energy crisis, such knowledge would not change the actual deteriorating conditions of Alma Blackwell. As ENF's 2019 building assessment made clear, the "face-sealed wall assemblies" which Alma Blackwell had been built with had "proven to fail and perform very poorly in the West Coast climate" and "revealed...various indication of moisture ingress" (Zavosh Consulting 2019: 3).

But nonetheless, knowing all this history does certainly complicate ENF and Eby's rationale for tearing down the building on the basis of its supposed obsolescence. The authority of the argument—that the premature failure of the building was an unfortunate inevitability caused by a mix of dated industry bad practice and natural material decay—can no longer as smoothly circumvent the social, economic, and ecological forces that produced such bad practices and failed to ameliorate the decay. Indeed, the patchy and partial attempts to repair the building over the 2010s make clear that premature demolition was not the first nor only possible future of Alma Blackwell. Even the private consultant hired by ENF in 2019 recommended not demolition but "remediation" through upgrades to and replacement of various components of the building envelope (Zavosh Consulting 2019: 4).

Any discursive claim, then to an objective state or naturalized process of obsolescence should be received skeptically; and any claim that a cost analysis justifies demolition (over

repair) should be interrogated not only through an ahistorical cost analysis, but through a history of policy incentives and maintenance practices that produced such an objective economic calculus and calculation.

## Chapter 4: Conclusion

As of April 23, 2023, Alma Blackwell remains standing, out front a magnificent cherry blossom in full bloom for yet another year. To the average passerby, little would seem to be afoot: there is no big development permit board yet, no boarded up windows, no fence around the exterior. On some terraces along the lengthy facade, plants and furniture and bicycles remain—the quiet evidence of life still ongoing inside.

This was not ENF’s plan. During the relocation meeting in April 2021, the nonprofit’s former director and for-profit consultants had laid out a clear estimated redevelopment timeline: Tenant relocation would be completed by Fall 2022. Demolition would follow quickly, and construction after that, which would take about 20 months. “That puts potential occupancy in late 2024,” one of the consultants said (Meeting 2021).

And after the meeting, relocation did proceed swiftly. Some tenants left on their own. Some were relocated to other ENF properties. And still others were relocated to properties owned or operated by a bigger nonprofit, Brightside Community Housing. By the midway point of Fall 2022, a majority of the units at Alma Blackwell were vacant, each documented by a small red dot on their respective mailboxes in the lobby.

And yet, today, a handful of tenants still remain. They have refused the alternative housing options offered to them thus far. And though they’re under no illusion that ENF will capitulate and let them stay, they hope to ride out their subsidized leases as long as possible, perhaps until the eviction notice arrives at their doorsteps.

This was not the outcome I anticipated either. In September 2022, after some months teaching in New England and a vacation in Europe, I returned to Vancouver expecting to find a hole in the ground where Alma Blackwell once stood. The small group of tenants who had been



resisting the redevelopment had fractured, and it had seemed to me that ENF was ahead of schedule with its relocation plan. In fact, I had so convinced myself the building was gone, that I avoided the site for a week, and cooped up in my house to write about it as it still stood in my mind.

It was the first clear day after wild- and industrial fires had engulfed Vancouver in smoke for half a week when, after another afternoon struggling to write, I hopped on my bike and zipped down the Adanac hill across Commercial street only to find Alma Blackwell standing still. The hole was next door. Some 25 feet deep, maybe 400 square feet around, I stared into the bottom. There were foundation columns and half-built cement walls with naked rebar poking out of the raw brown earth. There were piles of wood almost a block long and three different construction vehicles parked in between. Crows walked the wood fence that staked the property line.

It took a minute to recall the two houses that once stood here. On my way to interviews and site visits, I had passed them a dozen times with little more than a second glance. They were decrepit, abandoned, with vibrant graffiti covering much of the wood facade. Their stories were not the ones I was studying, and yet they were so close and now gone. One Alma Blackwell tenant I interviewed had even speculated (incorrectly) that ENF had bought the property and was planning to combine it into a single parcel to develop an even bigger housing complex.

Now two men come by and begin pulling closed a teal metal construction fence. I suddenly feel awkward, staring into this construction site, as if I'm doing something wrong. I grab a grip and ask a question. "Do you know what they're building?" One of the guys, the one not wearing a yellow work vest, says: "A whore house." I'm confused but I laugh with them. He continues on seriously: "Commercial on the bottom and then all wood on the top. Nice apartments. Rental."

I nod and ask them how many units the building will have and at that exact moment a woman walks by and answers for them: “One big wet fat one,” she says, and keeps walking without missing a step. By the time we stopped laughing again, I had recognized the woman as a tenant I had interviewed a couple times, and called out. She comes back over. By chance, I had messaged her that very morning, to check in on a trove of newsletters written by tenants between the late 1980s and 2000s that she was helping to track down. She says she actually recently found the very first newsletter ever published and that it’s remarkable how different the community was back then. We chat for a bit longer as the men lock the gates.

When I leave, as the sun is setting, I notice on the teal construction fence another sign advertising an excavating company. Someone has stuck a sticker over the second half of the word ‘Demolition’. It now reads:

DemoHOUSER

HOMELESS

To be honest, I’m still not exactly sure why this story, of all the stories of the Vancouver housing crisis I’ve experienced while writing this thesis, has stuck so hard. Perhaps something about the quiet critique hiding in the since-landfilled graffiti and the little sticker of overwriting; in the “whore house” development imagined as a “big fat wet one”; in the laughter shared between the workers and tenant. All of it subtle and messy, humdrum and sharp, and likely forgotten.

The coincidence of it all is shaped around over a century of planning. Early on in my research, I had outlined a thesis with three chapters all focused on density: where it came from, how it works, and where it’s moving. The concept was so new to me and seemed to be

everywhere in the housing discourse, entrenched as the register through which planners and nonprofit housing providers like ENF articulated their vision of the city. Density works, I argued, by orienting the terrain of contestation away from questions of power; by emptying the city and its land of history, of people and even places; by providing a “seemingly neutral mechanism” to envision and produce an eternally present ‘space’ in between things (Allen 2018).

But the more I read the growing literature on the concept, the more I became disillusioned by its technocratic narrowness. To give density the center of the entire project, I became convinced, would be to, even by way of critique, reproduce it unintentionally within the center of the discourse. Density’s rise needs to be better understood, but it cannot be dethroned without also being de-centered.

Certainly, the redevelopment of Alma Blackwell was catalyzed and rationalized by an ideology of density. But in the second and third chapter, I worked to show that the language of housing redevelopment is much wider, and more intimate and creative than the alluring glass tower of urban planning terminology. ENF and Alma Blackwell tenants also articulated visions and histories of ‘community’—at first in resonance with each other as the nonprofit attempted to institutionalize structures of limited tenant power; and then in tension, as those very strategies of institutionalization were degraded.

From there, I moved on to a new language invented by and for tenants to resist redevelopment and dispossession. In a way, the demoviction can be seen in part as a direct response to the rise of density—a fresh and intuitive portmanteau that combines multiple critiques into a single word. Tracing the etymology of this word opportunistically deployed by Alma Blackwell tenants revealed a constellation of local tenant movements they were implicitly in conversation with—from the West End to Burnaby.

That all this meandering and stitching of these three stories has produced a somewhat loose and uneven braid is a failure of my own ability. But I also believe it a testament to the fractured landscape of the Vancouver tenant movement. The through line, if there is one, is in the deep and towering ruins caused by the too-often wasteful practices of demolition of communal structures and the housing they were once afforded, all too often in the name of more housing, more density.

When I first moved to East Vancouver on January 1st 2021, to find some solace during the isolating lockdown I started to go for a walk at the end of most days to Trinity Park down the street. There was something about the park that charmed me: its littleness and narrowness, the bench with the memorable plaque; the cherry blossom with the perfect nook to climb into. I would often sit up in the tree and watch the big ships sit out in the bay, and as the sun set, imagine all the little tacky-tacky houses up the hill on the north shore watching too.

I'm not sure exactly how long it took before I heard the sirens. Months at least. They were coming from downtown and they had been there the whole time. A wale in the distance that never ceased. After I heard it for a while I couldn't unhear it. It was the sound of crisis, right there in the open, somehow invisible and visible at the same time. Somehow accepted as the unacceptable way it is.

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