

SINGLE ROOM OCCUPANCY HOUSING,  
TWO CASE STUDIES: VANCOUVER AND TORONTO

By

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the Single Room Occupancy Housing (SRO) stock of the City of Toronto and of the City of Vancouver. The term SROs refers to residential hotels and rooming houses. Rooming houses located in converted single family dwellings constitute the primary SRO form of Toronto. Residential hotels constitute the primary SRO form in Vancouver. This study examines the historical evolution of the SRO stock, the characteristics of the units, the socio-economic characteristics of the residents, and the provincial and municipal policy relating to the SRO stock.

SROs were the first form of accommodation for many immigrants and transient male workers. SRO units in rooming houses also housed couples and families during the first decades of the 1900's in both Toronto and Vancouver. A dire shortage of affordable rental housing forced families to live in overcrowded conditions in single rooms.

SROs today house primarily two thirds of population. Those who live in single rooms permanently, those who live in single rooms because they cannot afford to rent an apartment, and those who live in single rooms temporarily.

Contrary to what has been commonly assumed, residents of SROs are not transient. SRO residents, although they might move frequently, they do so because they continually face displacement. Evictions are common because of real estate market pressures. Many SRO units are being converted to other residential uses or demolished.

The main group of SRO residents still consists of single older men, however, the percentage of women and of young men has increased among the SRO residents in recent years, especially in the case of the rooming houses of Toronto. The majority of SRO residents live on incomes which are well below of the poverty line (approximately, 50% of the poverty line). These residents pay 50% to 75% of their income on housing.

SRO housing is an important component of the rental housing market of Vancouver and Toronto. SROs constitute the last housing resort before homelessness. However, with the exception of SRO units in social housing projects, SROs existing today in Toronto and Vancouver do not constitute an adequate form of accommodation. In most cases, the physical condition of the units is substandard and the rents are still very high for the average SRO resident. In Vancouver, SRO units are not fully recognized as part of the rental housing stock because they are not protected by provincial

landlord and tenant regulation.

The continued availability of SRO accommodation looks more optimistic in Ontario than it does in British Columbia. The main focus of the housing policy of Ontario and Toronto towards the SRO stock has been to rehabilitate, to improve and to expand the SRO stock. In addition, Ontario has recently drafted legislation which protects the rental housing stock from demolition and conversion and it has extended security of tenure rights to the residents of rooming houses. On the other hand, the main thrust of the housing policy of the province of British Columbia and of the City of Vancouver towards the SRO stock has been to relocate SRO tenants in social housing units.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 Introduction

This study analyzes the Single Room Occupancy Housing (SRO) stock of the city of Toronto and the city of Vancouver. This analysis includes the following areas:

1. the origins and development of SRO housing
2. the characteristics of the stock: numbers and trends over time, physical condition and affordability
3. the socio-economic profile of the residents: age, gender, education, employment, income, length of residence
4. municipal and provincial policy and program responses directed to the SRO housing stock and its residents

On the basis of the findings of this analysis, the following research questions will be addressed:

1. Who lives in SROs ?.
2. Do SROs fulfill adequately the housing needs of their residents ?
3. How fast is the SRO stock being lost ?
4. What is the impact of social housing programs on the SRO stock?

5. What is the role of SRO units in the provincial and municipal housing policy ?

6. What is the future of SRO accommodation in Vancouver and Toronto ?

The transient single male worker was the primary occupant of single room housing when it first originated in the late 1800's. The residents of SRO's in Vancouver are mainly single unemployed older males receiving social assistance, in recent years there has been an increase in the percentage of women and younger men. In Toronto, the SRO population is more heterogeneous than in Vancouver. It is composed of single men and women of diverse age groups and socio-economic backgrounds. In both cities, a large percentage of the SRO population is either permanently or temporarily out of the labor force because of old age and sickness. Those who are employed have occupations in the service sector. The average income of a SRO resident in Toronto ranges from \$5,600 for those receiving social assistance to \$10,800 for those who are employed. The average income for the SRO resident of Vancouver is \$5,300.

Contrary to what is commonly assumed, the majority of SRO residents are not transient. They consider their SRO unit to be a permanent form of housing. Their limited income forces them to remain in SRO units. If they move,

they do so involuntarily because they are evicted from their premises. There is also a group of people who are housed in SROs temporarily while they seek employment and other forms of housing.

The primary role of SRO accommodation has not changed since SROs first emerged in the mid-1800's. SROs still provide much needed affordable rental accommodation to the single men and women in our cities.

The adequacy of the present SRO housing stock is debatable. First, the physical condition of many SRO establishments is highly deteriorated. Second, SRO units although they are cheaper than self-contained apartments, they are still very expensive for the average SRO residents. Many SRO tenants pay between 50% and 75% of their income on rents.

In Vancouver, the SRO stock of the Downtown Eastside has been decreasing at an average rate of 3% annually since 1978. In Toronto, the rate of SRO loss is almost impossible to determine, approximately 7,000 rooming house units have been lost in the period between 1971 and 1985.

Social housing programs in Toronto have provided funding to build new SRO units and to renovate existing

ones. SRO units in social housing projects are affordable and constitute good quality housing. The affordability of these units and security of tenure of the residents are ensured in non-profit housing projects. Social housing programs in Vancouver have produced a new housing unit for single persons which consist of a self-contained apartment. Provincial or municipal housing funds have not been directed to renovate the existing SRO stock.

The future of SRO accommodation looks more optimistic in Ontario than it does in British Columbia. Since 1987, SROs have become an essential component of the Ontario housing policy, both, in terms of housing programs and regulatory measures to protect the stock and its residents. The province of British Columbia has not targeted any housing programs to renovate the SRO stock. British Columbia does not have legislation directed to protect the SRO stock from conversion and demolition. Moreover, legislation granting security of tenure to SRO residents is still pending.

At the local level, the city of Toronto has been directly involved in the preservation of the SRO stock and is currently involved in developing licensing procedures which might enhance the operation and quality of the rooming house stock. The main thrust of the local administration in

the City of Vancouver towards the SRO stock has been the provision of social housing for single people who used to live in SROs.

## 1.2 Rationale

A study of SRO housing is appropriate because this is a component of the rental housing sector which faces many external pressures. The residents of the SRO stock constitute a very vulnerable group in society because they are generally very poor and disabled.

We live in an era characterized by a homelessness crisis, loss of affordable housing, and cutbacks in housing programs. Large redevelopment projects in the downtown areas in combination with the absence of municipal controls have caused the loss of SRO units which have traditionally been located in inner city areas. Gentrification of inner city areas has placed the powerless people living in SROs in direct competition with relatively powerful and privileged actors for inner city space. SROs have lost to higher profit yielding land uses such as offices, luxury residential, commercial, and recreational developments. Municipal authorities in some North American cities such as San Diego, Los Angeles, and Portland are now paying attention to their already much depleted SRO stock. These municipalities now consider the renovation and preservation



of these units is seen as an important measure in order to lessen the problem of homelessness.

The rapid and continued increase of homeless persons has been related to the loss of SRO units. Many people have become homeless because they have been evicted from their SRO unit. Others remain homeless because they cannot find a SRO unit to rent.

SROs residents are a group of people continually at risk of becoming homeless. The SRO stock has not been fully recognized as part of the rental housing market and as a result, in many instances, the SRO tenants do not have security of tenure facing eviction from their units at any time. Moreover, the poor quality of shelter found in some SRO establishments makes SRO living highly inadequate.

### **1.3. The Context: the rental housing markets of Vancouver and Toronto**

Vancouver and Toronto are cities which are currently attracting many people. These large cities offer more job opportunities and, in the case of Vancouver, a milder climate. The rapid influx of newcomers has created a great demand for housing and frantic land speculation which in turn is influencing the rental housing market, including the SRO units in these two cities. The rental housing market of

Toronto and Vancouver is characterized by the following: low vacancy rates, declining construction of new rental units, declining number of non-profit housing, and long waiting lists for social housing. In both cities, the number of private sector rental starts has been steadily decreasing since 1983 (Appendix I).

The rental housing vacancy rate for the city of Toronto is 0.2% and from the city of Vancouver is 0.5%. The cost of renting a one bedroom apartment in Vancouver is slightly more than 50% of the poverty line for a single person (11,118); in Toronto, the average rent for a one bed-room apartment is approximately 90% of the poverty line for a single person. The social housing waiting list for the City of Toronto is estimated to be at around 10,000 people. Since October 1988, all the housing co-operatives of the city of Toronto have their waiting lists closed. In Vancouver, 5,700 people are now in the waiting list for social housing .

The high costs of housing in these cities is one of the major causes of poverty. A recent report from the Ontario government's Social Assistance Review Committee has concluded that the lack of affordable housing is a fundamental factor in perpetuating poverty in Metropolitan Toronto.

Gentrification of the inner city neighborhoods has caused a significant reduction of the affordable housing stock of Toronto. Since 1975, there has been an average loss of 1,000 affordable rental units per year. In the period between 1971 and 1985, there has been an estimated loss of 7,000 SRO units in the city of Toronto. These units have been converted to condominium or tourist accommodation, they have been renovated and turned into luxury accommodation, or they have de-converted again to single family accommodation.

In Vancouver, the supply of SRO units in rooming houses and residential hotels has been steadily decreasing in recent years, to the point that the supply of SROs has been reduced to those units located in the Downtown Eastside (Appendix II). In the period from 1978 to 1986 there has been a loss of 2,700 SRO units in the Downtown Eastside alone. In addition to the reduction of SRO units, in recent months the supply of rental units has been further decreased because many rental buildings in the West End and Kerrisdale are being demolished and replaced by condominium buildings.

#### **1.4 Scope**

This thesis examines the SRO units located in rooming houses and residential hotels of the cities of Vancouver and Toronto. The focus of the thesis are market SRO units,

however, when appropriate, reference is also made to SRO units located in social housing projects. Excluded from this thesis are the institutional SRO units located in group homes for ex-psychiatric patients, or any other health care facilities.

### 1.5. Methodology and Organization

A literature review examined reports and articles relating to the following topics:

1. Empirical studies of the SROs of Chicago and New York. These studies revealed that the population of SROs are not transient but they live in SRO units permanently. Single men and women, couples and even families with children are housed in SROs. Many of these are homeless families who have been placed in SROs by social welfare agencies. In the SROs of Chicago, there are a large number of low income working singles who like to live in SROs because of their proximity to their work.

2. Articles which indicate that gentrification has been the major force causing the loss of SRO units. Removal of the homeless and of those living in SRO units from the gentrified areas is seen as necessary because they conflict with the values and lifestyle of the "gentrifiers" who are mostly "well-paid, administrative, managerial, technical,

cultural, and professional workers". These studies also argue that gentrification has been sponsored by governmental policy.

3. Articles explaining the renovation and protection measures directed to the SRO units in cities such as Los Angeles, San Diego, San Francisco, and Chicago. The local administration and community groups in these cities have made an effort to renovate the SRO stock because these units are considered to be a very valuable source of affordable housing. These units can help to alleviate the problem of homelessness that these cities face.

The analysis of the SRO stock of Vancouver and Toronto is mainly a description of the characteristics of the stock, the residents, and of the housing policy and programs affecting the operation of SROs. When appropriate, comparisons between the two cities are made. The information necessary to analyze the SRO stock of Vancouver and Toronto has been obtained from the following sources:

1. reports from the city planning departments of Toronto and Vancouver
2. reports from the housing department of the City of Toronto

3. reports from non-profit community groups active in the area of housing
4. census data from Statistics Canada
5. municipal data files of the licensed rooming houses and hotels.
6. interviews with municipal planners, and community workers knowledgeable in the field of SRO and social housing
7. newspaper articles
8. recent journal articles and books on the topics of Single Room Housing, homelessness, and gentrification

Chapter Two consists of the review of empirical studies of SROs in the cities of Chicago and New York, review of articles which link gentrification to the loss of SRO units, and review of reports and articles of major renovation programs of SRO units in the United States.

Chapter Three includes a detailed examination of the SRO stock in the city of Toronto. This examination includes a historical development of SRO accommodation, a description of the numbers and characteristics of rooming houses, a description of the socio-economic characteristics of the residents of rooming houses. Finally, this chapter includes a description of the main housing programs and regulatory measures which have been developed at the municipal and

provincial level towards the improvement of the condition of the SRO stock and of the tenure situation of SRO tenants.

Chapter Four consists of a detailed examination of the SRO stock of the city of Vancouver. As in the case of Toronto, this examination includes a description of the number and characteristics of the rooming houses and residential hotels of Vancouver. Also, this chapter describes the socio-economic characteristics of the residents of Vancouver's SROs. The last part of the chapter describes the municipal and provincial programs towards the SRO stock.

Chapter Five summarizes the major findings of this study by addressing the six research questions described at the beginning of this chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Introduction

The literature on single room occupancy housing conveys a positive view of the stock and its residents. This view contrasts with the image of SROs prevalent during the 1950s and 1960s. The review of the literature in this chapter is divided into three sections.

The first section reviews recent empirical studies of the SRO housing stock and of its residents in New York and Chicago. SROs emerge in these studies as a valuable affordable housing resource. These studies reveal that there has been a definite shift in the role of SRO accommodation; from temporary accommodation to a permanent form of housing. There has also been a shift in the composition in the SRO population: from the traditional single male to a varied group of men and women, even families with small children along with the traditional single male resident. SRO tenants view their accommodation as permanent. Furthermore, SRO residents feel secure living in SROs despite the poor physical condition of some SRO establishments. Strict building code standards and



licensing requirements are the major obstacles encountered by SRO operators.

The second part reviews the effect of gentrification on the supply of SRO housing. Gentrification has been singled out as the main factor responsible for the depletion of SROs. Kasinitz (1984) defines gentrification as a matter of government policy. Marcuse (1988) explains gentrification as a result of changes in the composition of the labor force. Mair (1986) explains that gentrification has produced an environment which is the post-industrial city. The homeless and the poor are kept out from the post-industrial city because they conflict with the values held by its inhabitants.

The third section of the literature review provides examples of renovation efforts of SRO establishments in several cities in the United States. The preservation of the existing SRO units and the construction of new SRO units is seen as an important part of a solution to the problem of homelessness. These renovation efforts seek to demonstrate that SROs, a form of housing originally built for a transient and migratory labor force, can successfully become longer term shelter for the stable working and non-working poor. It is also hoped that through the renovation of SROs,

skid row areas will become important and vital neighborhoods in our cities.

## 2.2 The New Image of SROs and of Their Residents.

The image of Skid Row, as a world of dropouts and derelicts, developed during the post-World War II period. Schneider (1985) traces the development of skid row and of its institutions and distinguishes three main periods: the first coincided with the great hobo era around the turn of the twentieth century. A second followed in the late 1920s and 1930s when skid row became much less identified with migrant workers and more with the unemployed. And finally, by the post-World War II years when skid row became the familiar world of dropouts and derelicts.

Schneider explains that the post-World War II years were years of prosperity and consumer spending after a decade and a half of depression and war. This was a time of economic prosperity built increasingly around the single-family house in new automobile-oriented suburbs. Skid row and the men who remained in skid-row were seen as an anomaly in the midst of economic prosperity. These men were the home guard, handicapped, and pensioners, who were older and a less mobile group. Attention from the rest of society focussed exclusively on the problem of alcoholism among the homeless living there:

The old main stem had been associated with drinking as well, but even its most pious critics saw the classic hoboes and tramps mostly as rough working men or social misfits who simply overindulged in low-life. Their sins were wanderlust and laziness. The typical skid row man of the 1950s was supposedly a hopeless alcoholic, enslaved by his addiction to the point where he was totally unproductive. He was a pathetic creature lying in littered alleys, consumed by the daily quest for alcoholic oblivion (179).

This view of the SRO residents was also reflected and promoted in SRO studies of the 60's. For example, Joan Saphiro's paper titled Single Room Occupancy: Community of the Alone and Herbert Levy's paper titled Needed: a new kind of single room occupancy housing (1968) describe the SRO residents as people with "marked social and psychological maladaptations and chronic physical diseases" and "lacking the capacity to fulfill the ordinary human obligations of work, marriage, and child-rearing; rejecting any relationships with the larger society in which they find themselves; and rejected, in turn by it" (Levy, 1968: 573). Saphiro's paper was influential in drafting the legislation enacted in 1955 by the City of New York which prohibited the further creation of rooming houses (Blackburn 1986, 1-7).

Empirical studies of the Single Room Occupancy Housing stock of Chicago and New York indicate that the residents of SRO's do not fit the stereotype of the elderly, uneducated, substance abuser, white male and who needs help to perform

the activities of daily living, popularized in the 1950's and 1960's. In both cities, most residents are male, single, and poor. However, women and members of other ethnic groups are also present in the SRO stock in significant numbers. In Chicago, for example, one in five SRO residents is a woman and one in two belong to a minority group. Moreover, less than one in ten residents is 65 years old or older (Community Emergency Shelter Organization and Jewish Council On Urban Affairs 1985, 6).

The residents of SRO's in New York are a mixed group of white, blacks and hispanic people. In the rooming houses of New York, over half of the residents are less than 40 years old. The larger percentage of 60 and over group is found in the residential hotels. One third of the residents of SRO hotels are women. There are many families with children living permanently in the SRO's of New York. These are homeless families placed in SRO's by the Housing Redevelopment Agency . The presence of these families accounts for the high mean number of occupants per single room unit which is 1.49 (Balckburn 1986 3-3).

The average New York SRO resident works or actively pursues work. The residents of SROs hold a varied number of occupations which range from jobs in the service sector to managerial and professional activities. Those who are

neither employed nor searching for work claimed retirement, permanent disability, or public assistance, thus leaving a small fraction of the SRO population who might be classified, although not necessarily, as the "shiftless bumb" (Community Emergency Shelter Organization and Jewish council on Urban Affairs 1985 8; Blackburn 1986, 3-6).

Contrary to the stereotype of rootless wanderers, the Chicago study found that about one-half of the SRO residents had lived in their present unit for two years or more, while 29% had lived there four years or more. The study further acknowledged that SRO residents tend to move more frequently than the general population, however, these frequent moves were the result of great displacement pressures affecting the SRO population in particular. The SRO residents were forced to move from their accommodations because they were evicted or forced out as a result of cutting the supply of gas, water, and electricity (Community Emergency Shelter Organization 1985 15). SRO residents are not voluntarily transient. Their frequent moves are a reflection of the powerful displacement pressures they face.

The studies of Chicago's and New York's SROs indicate that the majority of the respondents were satisfied with their SRO units and that they felt relatively safe in their present accommodations, even though some of them had been

victims of criminal attacks in their premises. The New York study indicated that almost half of the respondents would prefer to remain in the building rather than moving elsewhere; over 70% indicated that they were satisfied with their present form of housing (Balckburn 1986, 3-10).

The respondents of the Chicago study indicated that convenience, availability, independence, affordability, quality, and proximity to friends and relatives were the major advantages that the SRO living offered to the residents (28-29). The residents in both cities expressed their dissatisfaction with the physical limitations of the SRO dwellings and also complained about the presence of different types of pests. The residents stated that if they had a choice, they would prefer to live in self-contained units where they could cook and have private bathroom facilities. Overall, the residents expressed a great attachment to their SRO unit. Many have lived in their unit for decades and if evicted they would feel a great personal loss (Community Emergency Shelter Organization and Jewish Council on Urban Affairs 1985, 28 and 29).

Despite the personal attachment that the SRO residents feel towards their units, the shabby physical condition of many SRO establishments is a big problem. It has often been the target of criticisms by opponents of the SROs. The

deteriorated physical condition of the SRO units has been used as the justification for policies aimed at eliminating the SRO units. Siegal (1986) associates the physical condition of the SRO establishment with the easiness of accessibility to the building by outsiders. Using SROs of New York city, Siegal distinguishes two types of SRO establishments: closed and open. An "open" building is one that has more than one entrance and there is little or no control placed upon who enters or leaves the building. The manager of the establishment or the gatekeeper simply rents the rooms to anyone who can pay for them. The manger or gatekeeper of the "closed" building, on the other hand, demands that the tenants meet certain standards of dress, conduct, employment or finances before a room will be rented to them. The openness and closeness of the building, according to Siegal, determines the quality of the SRO accommodation. In open buildings the conditions might be such that the physical integrity of the tenants might be in danger, either as a result of criminal acts inflicted by outsiders through the potential contraction of diseases resulting from lack of cleanliness in the building.

Perhaps one of the most striking memories that I retain of the SROs that I worked in was that of two infant black girls, one completely naked and the other in a torn pink shift, playing on the floor of a hotel corridor, littered with broken bottles, garbage and dog feces; cockroaches were crawling on the walls and the entire scene was

bathed dimly by the flickering light of a dying fluorescent lamp (Siegal 1986, 227).

The open buildings tend to be populated by those people who have had difficulty finding accommodation elsewhere. These are most likely to manifest bizarre and unusual behaviour, be alcoholics or addicts. These open buildings prove to be most dilapidated and the dirtiest. The population of the closed buildings is less mobile, quieter and less likely to be considered a neighborhood nuisance. Many of the "open" SRO buildings of the City of New York house tenants, including families with children, placed by social welfare agencies. These tenants are powerless when it comes to deal with the inadequacies of their accommodation. If the tenant complains to his or her caseworker and he or she files a formal complaint with the Health Department, the city would be obliged to intervene. City intervention would mean that an inspector would have to be sent to the building to seek evidence of the problem and consequently take legal action against the landlord. The landlord might decide to sell the premises rather than paying for the corresponding fines. This action further reduces the already limited housing options of the poor in the city (Siegal 1986 231).



The Chicago and New York study reveal that the regulatory environment controlling SRO accommodation hinders their performance severely. The enforcement of strict building code regulations and licensing requirements, in most cases, leaves the owner with the limited options of conversion or demolition. These regulations regard SROs as a form of short-term accommodation rather than what they are really are, a form of long-term permanent accommodation. In Chicago, for example, all the SRO buildings violate the new standards which have been introduced in the building code over the years. This particular study found that the existence of strict building codes promoted less safety by generating an atmosphere of profound uncertainty. The owners felt that the constant threat of strict enforcement of existing rules discouraged them from undertaking major renovations in their buildings. In addition, the owners of the SRO establishments complained about the difficulty they faced in obtaining loans from financial institutions in order to pay for major improvements or for mortgage payments (Community Emergency Shelter Organization and Jewish Council on Urban Affairs 1985, 61).

The Chicago study recommended that a more realistic set of building code standards and licensing regulations control SROs. These regulations must recognize the "real" function of SROs which is a sort of residential hybrid which combines

the characteristics of hotel and apartment accommodation. The study called for a reduction in the number of inspections to SRO establishments while at the same time called for an enforcement of the necessary improvements and repairs. The City's Fire Department, for example, visits each SRO establishment an average of six times a year; the Health Department inspects the establishments an average of four times a year. Apartment buildings, on the other hand, are exempt of such inspections (Community Emergency Shelter Organization and Jewish Council On Urban Affairs 1985, 71).

### **2.3 Gentrification and The Loss of SRO Units**

Gentrification has been the major cause of the loss of SRO units across North America. Gentrification refers to both public and private developments together with conversion by SRO owners themselves. The result of gentrification pressures has been the loss of SRO units and consequent displacement of the low income individuals living in these units. Displacement of low income households occurs because gentrification places powerless, low income people in direct competition with powerful and privileged actors for inner city space (Kasinitz 1986, 242).

#### **A. Gentrification as a Matter of Governmental Policy**

Kasinitz (1986) maintains that the redevelopment of inner city areas has been a matter of government policy. He

supports his statement by giving examples of how inner city redevelopment projects have been supported by local and federal governments. Kasinitz's argument is also confirmed by the results of the empirical studies of SROs in Chicago and in the city of San Francisco.

In Phoenix, Arizona, the elimination of missions and SRO's from the inner city has been made a cornerstone of downtown renewal efforts. In 1981, the city administration enacted an ordinance which outlawed sleeping in public property and searching through garbage. Another zoning ordinance excluded shelters and soup kitchens from the newly renovated downtown. The result of these city-sponsored ordinances was that thirty single-room occupancy hotels were closed along with two religious-run missions, a detoxification centre, a 70 year old Salvation Army shelter and soup kitchen, and four other shelters (Kasinitz 1986, 246; Mair 1986, 357).

Kasinitz (1985) indicates that New York city lost 30,835 units in 160 buildings between 1975 and 1981. These losses immediately followed the extension of the city's J-51 tax abatement program to cover SRO hotels. This accounts for a decrease of 60% of the total SRO stock of the City of New York. The J-51 is a program that provides property tax abatements as incentives for landlords to renovate

buildings. The landlords undertaking renovations used the money to convert SRO units into self-contained apartments; residents were previously evicted from the buildings in order to proceed with the renovations (248).

The loss of SRO hotels in Chicago began in the 1960's as a result of the implementation of plans for downtown redevelopment. These redevelopment projects have continued until today favoured by enormous public subsidies from federal and municipal government agencies. The Presidential Towers Project is a case in point (Community Emergency Shelter Organization and Jewish Council On Urban Affairs 1985, 53).

The Presidential Towers Project included four residential towers placed on top of three stories of office and commercial space spreading across two city block. Only about 200 out of the 2,346 residential units contained two bedrooms. The majority of the housing was directed towards middle class singles and couples who worked in the Downtown area and preferred this location because of the proximity to residential amenities. The project involved the following list of subsidies:

1. the land was sold out to developers at the same price the city purchased it 15 years prior to this development;

2. the City sold \$180 million worth of municipal bonds at 9% interest rate which the developers used as a short term construction loan instead of paying higher interest on loans from private financial sources;
3. the developer secured a \$158 million mortgage from the Federal Government at 9.5% interest rate;
4. the developers received permission to use a favourable depreciation rate in calculating their tax loss; and
5. the developers were released from paying penalties they incurred because they delayed securing the mortgage commitment from the federal government (Community Emergency Shelter Organization and Jewish Council On Urban Affairs pp. 58-59).

This particular redevelopment project had the effect of demolishing one SRO hotel and displacing its 300 residents. The indirect effect of this particular redevelopment project was the further increase in the land values of the area.

The city of San Francisco is an outstanding example of the effect of government policy on the supply of SRO hotels. Between 1975 and 1979, San Francisco lost 5,723 (17.7%) of its 32,214 SRO units. Much of this decline was the direct result of the renovation of the city's famous Tenderloin district where 20 SRO establishments containing 1,192 units were converted to tourist hotels. Other SRO units were lost to government-subsidized Section 8 renovation programs. The minimum property standards of the rehabilitation projects using federal Section 8 require separate kitchens and baths for each unit rather than allowing the congregate type of facilities most SRO's provide. This requirement

encouraged the conversion of SROs and rooming houses into standard self-contained apartments (Kasinitz 1985, 247; Hartman et al. 1982, 55-56).

#### **B. Gentrification as a Result of Changes in the Composition of the Labor Force.**

Marcuse argues that internal changes in the organization of labor are directly responsible for the displacement of homeless from both their current form of shelter (non-formal housing) or from their previous form of housing (which includes SROs). The specific labor stratum to whom Marcuse refers is the "well-paid administrative, managerial, technical, cultural, and professional workers." This specific labour class does heavily interactive and specialized work which in turn has created an exceptional demand for nearby housing. This demand has taken over the cheap residential areas adjacent to the downtown areas (Marcuse 1988, 10).

In addition to proximity to work, gentrified environments, "provide for those engaged in work demanding creative but inherently unproductive and unrewarding labor, a set of satisfactions not available from their work but necessary for their motivation " (10). These type of workers must find the necessary motivation to continue with their work in the gentrified environments because neither

the lure for power, not the fear of hardship provide sufficient motivation for these workers. The gentrified environments are homes and neighborhoods which have strong cultural and historical amenities and have been carefully decorated with sophisticated aesthetic components.

### **C. Gentrification and the Post-Industrial City**

Mair (1986) argues that gentrification has resulted in the production of a built environment which is called the post-industrial city. In this environment, office employees work, live and be entertained. The term post-industrial city refers, not to a city which is consigned to another time, rather to a city which is banished to another place (363). The post-industrial city is a space reserved for post-industrial activities. The post-industrial city is one of super-commodification, in which 'going out' to spend money at the opera, theatre, movies, nightclubs, bars and restaurants has to a large extent replaced 'staying in' with the television and children as the focus of leisure-time activity (363-364).

The post-industrial city must be heavily marketed in order to enhance its attraction. The marketing strategies require the absence of physical detractions; the presence of poor people either as homeless or as residents of SROs are one of such detractions . The post-industrial city must be

a space which is internally homogeneous and must be separated from the sites of industry and poverty. The post-industrial city reclaims private and public spaces, not even the streets can be left to the homeless or the poor. As Kasinitz (1984) says:

The diversity currently being celebrated is limited; it is a 'safe' diversity. It does not extend to people who, for whatever reasons make middle-class people uncomfortable. Ironically, that includes many of those who had traditionally, and during the 1970s increasingly, made downtown streets, their home (10).

A well known example of how this homogeneity is achieved is the case of New York. New York City-the one municipality doing more for the homeless than any other in the county-has adopted a public policy to provide shelter but only in large human warehouses, preferably far removed from public view.

Both, Marcuse and Mair raise the point that displacement occurs because the presence of the homeless challenges the values of the predominant labour class in the post-industrial city, the primary gentrifiers. Mair examines how the post-industrial city views the homeless person (and those sharing similar lifestyle characteristics). Mair distinguishes three areas which form a composite view that the dwellers of the post-industrial city have of the homeless person. These views can also be applied to



people living in SROs since SROs also represent a non-conventional form of living and in many occasions the external appearance of the SRO dweller and that of the homeless person is the same.

1. The inhabitants of the post-industrial city, although they have a concern for the 'unfortunate' they see the responsibility for their care lying on government institutions and also including philanthropic organizations. This has been the result of the expansion of "commodity-mediated" social relations. As commodification in our society has expanded, the field of personal social obligations has shrunk, for many people, almost to the self, resulting in indifference towards the homeless.

2. the post-industrial society sees the homeless as deviants; they are outside the 'normal' society. The homeless defy social forms in several ways. Homeless do not have a home; homeless offend the senses because they say the wrong thing such as asking for money; homeless deviate because they are unemployed and thus poor. The homeless might be mentally disturbed, this frightens people.

3. the post-industrial society sees the homeless as a source of anxiety. The presence of the homeless creates anxiety. The homeless threaten the definition of America as a land of opportunity for all. Moreover, the persistent problem of homelessness reminds the inhabitants of the post-industrial city that the government institutions responsible for caring are failing. Finally, the presence of the homeless arouse anxiety through the potential contact with children. Adults become anxious when are faced with having to explain the presence of homeless to the children because this reminds them of the frustrating nature of our society (Mair 1984, 358-361).

The perseverance of these values and views of the homeless and other poor living in non-conventional forms of housing such as SROs and emergency shelters among policy

makers one of the major adversaries that advocacy campaigns for universal and affordable housing face.

## **2.4 Renovation Efforts of Single Room Occupancy**

### **Establishments**

SROs are making a come back in cities such as Los Angeles, San Diego, Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Portland, Chicago, and Seattle (New York Times, Sept 6, 1988). These cities have already initiated, or will undertake in the near future, projects which involve the preservation and renovation of existing SROs as well as the construction of new SRO units. Many of these cities have had to relax their building codes to renovate SRO accommodation. SROs are a form of non-traditional shelter and often do not comply with local building codes concerning regarding minimal floor area, spatial arrangements, number of exits, as well as, fire and other safety requirements.

In 1984, the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles created the Single Room Occupancy Housing Corporation (SROHC) to acquire, renovate, and manage residential hotels in the skid row areas of Los Angeles. The SROCH owns eleven SRO hotels, eight of which are already operating and providing approximately 1,000 SRO units. Theses units are occupied by people who used to be homeless

and by other low income men and women working in a variety of occupations.

The adoption of an affordable housing strategy based on the renovation SROs was the result of the convergence of several circumstances:

- (1) the city administration was faced with the problem of providing long-term accommodation for 35,000 homeless people when the capacity of missions, shelters, and voucher hotel rooms was only for 10,000 people.
- (2) The growth in the attractiveness of skid row land for industrial development which was resulting in the continued demolition of SROs. In a 10 year period, Los Angeles had lost 7,000 single room occupancy units from the central skid row area. This number was greater than the actual number of SRO units still in place. If the remaining skid-row housing was not salvaged, 10,000 more people could become homeless.
- (3) Additional pressure for the SRO housing stock came from the adoption by the City of Los Angeles of a seismic safety ordinance. This ordinance requires that the buildings must be reinforced or torn down. The cost of strengthening these buildings ranges from \$3,000 to \$7,000 per unit. This high cost can result in the loss of these SRO units from the affordable housing stock. Loans are now provided to owners of SROs for the rehabilitation of the units according to this new ordinance. These loans contain antidisplacement agreements.
- (4) Increased immigration of families who competed with traditional skid row population for housing in skid row because of its proximity to the garment district of Los Angeles (Heskin 1987, 170-183).

The SRO owners who want to participate in the renovation program, sponsored by the city of Los Angeles are offered low-interest, long-term rehabilitation loans if they

agree to operate the properties as hotels for the poor for 15 to 30 years. The efforts of the SROHC have been complemented by a moratorium imposed in March of 1988 on the demolition of SRO hotels (New York Times September 6, 1988).

Investment in SRO hotels is seen not only as means to provide affordable housing for the homeless of Los Angeles but also as means to rehabilitate the skid row areas of the City. It is the general belief that a stable human environment can be achieved by upgrading the skid row housing. Central locations are preferred for the provision of affordable housing because they offer accessibility to services and transportation. Skid row areas offer such accessibility and furthermore they act as a "safety net" for street people. Hotels, parks, health, welfare, and employment services along the presence of long-time friends form an important support system. This support system is important for both the people who have resided in skid row areas for a long time as well as for the new comers to skid row, who are the immigrants from Latin American countries and migrants from other parts of the United States.

The City of Los Angeles has relaxed its building codes, offered low-interest loans to builders, and provided low interest loans to SRO owners as incentives to the private

sector to build and operate single-room occupancy hotels. For example, the new code has reduced the requirement that doors on the stair shaft be able to withstand fire from one hour to 20 minutes, if builders put in automated fire sprinklers. This was cheaper, and the city felt this measure was just as effective in controlling a fire in SRO buildings. Another provision allows builders to use approved plastic pipe instead of the more costly cast iron for plumbing. The cost of building an SRO unit is \$20,000 against \$50,000 for a studio apartment. The administrators of the program feel that the return to owners for their investment can be higher than for regular apartments because the rooms are so small. The rents for rooms in the renovated hotels range from about \$220 to \$390 a month. These rents are well below the \$500 a month rent charged for the cheapest studio apartments in the city. There is no income limit for people living in the hotels except for those built or rehabilitated with the help of city loans. In those, the owners are required, for five years, to offer at least 20 percent of the rooms to low income residents at below-market rents. Since this program has started, a total of 565 rooms have been built and another 1,500 rooms are either under construction or planned (Heskin 1987, 176)

The San Diego Housing Commission offers a three percent loan to build new SRO units. The funds for this loan come

from a pool of money that the Housing Commission has accumulated from the lease of lands it owns. This loan from the city covers the gap in financing which the owners of SRO faced. Conventional lenders were not willing to take a risk by financing the new SRO's. An example of a new SRO hotel is the Baltic Inn which contains 207 rooms. The rooms are 10 by 15 feet carpeted with a double bed, colour television, microwave oven, small refrigerator and a toilet separated by a small partition; showers are located down the hall. The rent for this room is \$80 a week, somewhat lower on a monthly basis. Downstairs, near the front desk, there is an airy common area where residents can socialize. This hotel houses a varied group of people, those receiving social assistance, retired on social security pensions, others are entry-level workers or waiters on low incomes, or itinerant construction and military service people (New York Times September 6, 1988).

San Francisco has adopted the use of inclusionary zoning to slow the rapid loss of SROs in some areas of the city. This law was adopted in 1979, after a moratorium was placed on residential hotel conversions and demolitions in an effort to save threatened single-room-occupancy units from gentrification or demolition. This law requires a one-for-one replacement of any SRO units lost, or a financial contribution equal to the cost of replacing the units

(Richter 1986, 39). A similar ordinance is in place in Miami and in New York City where there is currently a moratorium on SRO conversions.

Seattle has adopted an ordinance which requires an equal replacement of any housing that is going to be demolished. Another ordinance adopted by the city allows the transfer of development rights. The transfer of development rights works in the following way. SROs are often located in or near a downtown and are generally in areas zoned mixed commercial and residential. Because of their age and building type, SROs have less floor area than the floor area ratio allowed by zoning ordinance. If there is a significant amount of new commercial development taking place in or near downtown, developers have a strong incentive to demolish the SROs and construct a commercial building, or luxury condominiums, with the maximum allowable floor area ratio. One incentive to save SRO units, is for the city to adopt legislation prohibiting SRO conversions in that specific area but allowing the "unused" development potential of the site to be sold and added to the density of another development. If housing units are removed in that zone, they must be replaced in another location by the developer of the site, or a payment must be made into a development fund for replacement housing (New York Times September 6 1988).

New York City housing officials have begun a multibillion-dollar, 12 year plan to build affordable housing, some of which will go to single adults who are poor or homeless. The renovation of some SRO establishments is part of this plan. The city administration has not considered changing the building code to stimulate new construction of SRO housing.

Renovation of SROs has been undertaken as initiative of non-profit organizations and the sources of funding are a mix of loans from the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development , a Special Needs Housing Act from the City, and private foundations and funds from federal government agencies (New York Times September 6, 1988).

In Chicago owners of nearly 200 SRO hotels have banded together into the Single Room Operators Association, and their president, Eric Rubenstein, said that banks are now more willing to lend money for renovating such housing than in the past. The SROs of Chicago might be experiencing a change in their public image and growing sympathy for their residents (New York Times September 6, 1988). The city administration of Chicago, unlike the cases of Los Angeles and San Diego, is still reluctant to finance any renovation



or new construction projects for SROs. However, there are efforts on the way which involve non-profit agencies which provide shelters in the city and the hotel owners (Charles Hoch, Pers. Comm. October 13, 1988).

## 2.5 Conclusion

A review of the current literature related to SRO's reveals that there are many efforts in the way, in several North American cities, to upgrade SRO's. The administration of these cities has been faced with a rapid increase in the number of homeless people while the SRO stock was rapidly decreasing. These renovation efforts indicate that SRO's are considered to be a valuable resource of affordable rental housing.

There is conclusive evidence that gentrification has been the major cause for the depletion of SRO units in North America. The homeless and residents of SRO's have been forced out of the gentrified environments because their lifestyle conflicts with the values of the gentrifiers.

Results from empirical studies of SRO accommodation and of its residents reveal that SROs constitute now the permanent accommodation for the employed and unemployed single men and women from varied age groups.

## CHAPTER THREE

### SINGLE ROOM OCCUPANCY HOUSING IN TORONTO

#### 3.1 Historical Background

Rooming houses constitute the primary form of single room occupancy housing in Toronto. Rooming houses have almost exclusively been created by subdividing single family homes into rooms for rent. The conversion of single family dwellings into multiple rental units has been encouraged at different times in Toronto's history by economic and housing demand circumstances. Rooming houses first emerged in the mid-1800's to house the rapid influx of immigrants and transient workers. In the 1930's, rooming houses were created from a stock of large single family homes. The subdivision of these homes into rooming houses represented the only economically viable way to maintain these large homes. In the early 70's, a time of great demand for accommodation for singles, new single room occupancy units appeared in the form of bachelorettes. Throughout these years, rooming houses have provided mainly accommodation for single men who were either transient workers, newcomers to the city and looking for jobs, or the unemployed.

Rooming houses originated in the mid and late 1800's when there was widespread conversion of all available

housing space into sleeping space to accommodate the rapid influx of single males and families from abroad. During the second half of the 19th century, Toronto experienced a great influx of immigrants from Britain and other parts of Ontario. Toronto in 1851 housed 30,775 people, in 1901 Toronto housed 208,040 people. This represented a population increase of 700% in 50 years (Goheen 1977, 56). Toronto also received an influx of transient workers who were seeking employment in the construction of the railroads. The transient workers were "disbanded soldiers and commuted pensioners who had failed in the bush" (Oki and Sirman 1960, 3). An interesting feature of the city in this period was the existence of a group of adolescents known as "street boys" who wandered the streets selling papers, and were often forced to beg to subsist. In the summer they slept outside, but in the winter months they found accommodation in cheap lodging houses and in charitable organizations. These street boys, when they became older, constituted the population of hobos who frequented the cheap lodging house districts of the North American cities during the late 19th and early 20th. The immigrant population and the transient workers found accommodation primarily in rented rooms in private homes.

The second half of the 19th century was a period of great economic growth in Toronto. Toronto became an

important export trade center with Britain and a manufacturing center. Lumber, grain, livestock, hardware, and consumer goods were among the items exported to Britain. The incoming immigrants constituted the necessary labour force to undertake these economic activities (Goheen 1977, 57).

Hostels built by religious institutions were also a primary form of accommodation for transient single men. Men's hostels were opened by religious and philanthropic institutions in the late 19th century and early 20th centuries in response to the need to house a growing migratory workforce during the off season and in periods of temporary unemployment (Hopkins 1984, 12). In 1864 the Young Men's Christian Association was organized in Toronto and in 1896 the Fred Victor Mission was established (Oki and Sirman 1960, 10). The people housed in the hostels were singles, unattached men who moved from the farms to the cities in search of work in the newly expanded industries of logging, mining, railroad building and manufacturing. It was assumed that all the men in these hostels would be all working soon therefore only minimal services would be needed. The predominant role of the charitable organizations in housing single men has been considered to be the main reason why Toronto has never possessed a great concentration of

cheap lodging houses and SRO hotels as it has been the case in other North American cities (Oki and Sirman 1960, 11).

Areas surrounding the downtown of Toronto, like St. John's Ward, Regent Park, Moss Park, and Cabbagetown became the primary reception enclaves for the large number of immigrants. These areas, in time, became the traditional skid row areas of Toronto. The result of this rapid increase in population in a short period of time was overcrowding and deplorable housing conditions; these areas were real slums and housing speculation was rampant. The newcomers and transient workers found accommodation primarily in rented rooms in private homes. Families with children and single individuals alike lived in single rooms (Bruce Report 1934, 22-77).

Municipal taxation policies present in the 1880's were primarily responsible for the overcrowding conditions prevailing in the districts surrounding the downtown. These taxation policies encouraged the conversion of the existing homes into multiple rental units. These overcrowded homes were the only available form of rental housing at the time.

The tax system undertaxed the vacant land held for speculation purposes and overtaxed those who erected

buildings on the land. Landlords judged that their best course of action was to invest in land rather than on housing. They adopted the strategy of waiting until the values of the land increased through the commercial development and improvement going on in the downtown core. Had the landlords invested in rented housing, speculation would have not been stimulated so vigorously and consequently the raise in property values and rents would have been less; the rental housing market would have been made less profitable (Dennis, 1987 16). These overcrowded accommodations were a profitable rental market because the rents were high, the units were small, and there was no new housing supply.

By the beginning of the 20th century the central areas of Toronto became more commercialized and were redeveloped into office complexes and warehouses. Consequently, the skid row areas shifted East and West of the downtown such as Queen and Sherbourne East of Yonge street and Spadina and Queen, and also the east section of Parkdale, West of Yonge street (Oki and Sirman 1960, 17). In these areas, inexpensive accommodation was found in the form of rooming and lodging houses and hostels.

During the 50's and 60's, the population of skid row areas of Toronto was composed of varied groups, the

transient worker, pensioners, ex-convicts with some social adaptation problems, and people who preferred to live in the area because they liked the services it provided. The ranks of the skid row population were supplemented by immigrants from the Atlantic provinces, from high unemployment and low-income areas of Ontario and Quebec, and from the Indian reservations of Ontario. These single men had travelled across the country often from coast to coast, in a sporadic search for work. They, perhaps, settled in Toronto for a short time before moving on to try their luck elsewhere. Manufacturing activities located nearby these central districts were the main employment sources for skid row men. Cheap clothing, coffee, and conversation were found in the pawnshops, second hand clothing stores, soup kitchens, and in rooming houses (Whitney 1970, 67).

Rooming houses emerged in the affluent Parkdale neighborhood of Toronto as a result of the economic depression of the 1930's. Many prosperous families from the Parkdale neighborhood of Toronto were adversely affected by the economic depression of the 1930's. These families could no longer maintain their large homes as single family dwellings. Despite the bylaws in place at the time which prohibited multiple occupancy, the owners were forced to break them into flats, rent them as group homes to fraternities and to non-profit organizations, or fill them

with roomers or boarders. The residents owners who remained were forced to double up with other families to be able to afford the cost of maintaining the dwelling (Lemon 1985, 65).

Neighborhood opposition arose from other homeowners who opposed to these single family dwellings being filled with roomers and boarders or with families of "foreign origin". Despite this opposition, in 1941, the City's Independent Committee on zoning drafted a zoning by-law which allowed the conversion of these single family homes to multiple uses, namely apartments and rooming houses. This by-law was elaborated in view of the extreme economic hardship of these families (Lemon 1985, 65).

During the early 1970's another form of Single Room Occupancy housing emerged in Toronto. This type of accommodation was know as bachelorettes. Bachelorettes, like rooming houses were the result of the conversion of the large single family homes of the Parkdale area to multiple use dwellings. Bachelorettes are self-contained units. They are related to rooming houses because they were originally licensed as rooming houses, and subsequently, converted illegally to self-contained units by essentially adding illegal cooking facilities, usually, a hot plate.



Operators preferred to create illegal bachelorettes rather than to operate legal rooming houses for a number of reasons. First, there was a demand for housing for single people, which was not being met because the existing housing was too expensive, inadequate, and it was limited in numbers and in location. Second, the supply of rooming houses by mid 1970's was decreasing. This decrease was the result of the imposition of stricter development restrictions and licensing requirements. The supply of rooming houses further dwindled because many rooming houses were deconverted to single family homes as a response to gentrification pressures (Bureau of Municipal Research 1982, 2-5).

Third, many of the small developers saw these bachelorette conversions as the only way to get into the rental market on a profitable basis compared to rooming houses. The conversion of single family homes to bachelorettes resulted in buildings with six to ten units each. Fourth, the creation of bachelorettes was influenced indirectly by redevelopment plans for some neighborhoods. City planning policies at the time encouraged some form of redevelopment in some parts of the city. In Cabbagetown redevelopment took the form of urban renewal plans. In the Annex and South Parkdale, redevelopment took the form of apartment construction. These policies indirectly

introduced an element of uncertainty into the neighborhood and encouraged landlords to hold their properties for long-term speculation purposes in the expectation that redevelopment would occur and more apartments would be built. Rooming houses, the stock from which bachelorettes originated, then, represented the most economical way to hold property pending redevelopment while at the same time filling the gap of much needed housing for singles (Bureau of Municipal Research 1982, 3-5).

Strong neighborhood opposition against bachelorettes developed. The residents of the Parkdale area were concerned about the great deal of external physical alterations that the single family homes of the neighborhood had undergone when they were converted to bachelorette units. This opposition prompted the City to declare new and existing bachelorettes illegal in 1981. In addition, the City developed a set of actions directed to prevent the further creation of bachelorette units. These controls imposed a minimum size on the units and of the parking requirements for rooming houses and converted dwelling houses, the vehicles used to create bachelorettes (Bureau of Municipal Research 1982, 9).

Single room occupancy housing, in the form of rooming houses, has emerged in Toronto as a response to great

demand for affordable housing units and to the needs of the economy. In the 1970's bachelorettes filled a void in the rental market housing for singles. In the 1930's, the conversion of large homes into rooming houses in affluent areas in the city enabled their owners to cope with hard economic times. In the late 1800's, the subdivision of homes into single rooms represented the fastest way to provide housing for the rapid influx of immigrants arriving to Toronto. Rooming houses and single rooms in converted dwelling houses have been the primary accommodation of single men. Families with children were also housed in single rooms at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century.

The emergence of the rooming house accommodation in Toronto demonstrates the flexibility of the single family stock to accommodate to rapidly changing needs in housing demand. Moreover, single room housing units are an example of 'affordable' and economically profitable rental units produced by the private market. Their economic profitability was based on the fact the units were small and the rents relatively high for the amount of room available.

### 3.2 Toronto's SRO Stock: Rooming Houses

#### A. Municipal Definitions of Rooming Houses

The operation of rooming houses in the City of Toronto is subject to a number of regulations containing inconsistent definitions of what a rooming house is. These regulations are three municipal by-laws and two provincial statutes:

- \* the Housing By-Law 73-68,
- \* the Rooming House By-Law 502-80, and
- \* the Zoning By-Law 438-86, all as amended
- \* the Ontario Fire Code
- \* the Ontario Building Code

The Rooming House By-Law. This by-law defines a rooming house as any dwelling that contains more than three dwelling units in which accommodation is provided for a minimum of 5 people. Of these three dwelling units, at least two must not provide bathroom and kitchen facilities at the same time. The third dwelling unit might or might not be a self-contained unit. Thus, the minimum requirements for the operation of a rooming house under this rooming house by-law are : two rooms, and 5 tenants overall.

The housing By-law. The housing by-law defines a rooming house as a dwelling that contains more than three dwelling units which provide accommodation for at least five

people and two of the dwelling units must not provide culinary and sanitary facilities simultaneously. Essentially, the housing by-law defines rooming houses in the same way as the rooming house by-law.

The Zoning By-Law. The zoning by-law does not use the term of "rooming house" in its definition of what a rooming house is. Rather it introduces two terms that are not referred to in either the rooming house by-law nor in the housing by-law. The zoning by-law speaks of boarding or lodging houses and converted dwelling and lodging houses. These are defined as "a dwelling house, which provides two or more dwelling units and one or more boarding or lodging rooms". The dwelling unit referred in this zoning by-law is essentially a self-contained unit with culinary and sanitary facilities provided for the exclusive use of the persons living in the dwelling unit. Thus, the minimum requirements stated in this zoning by-law for a rooming house are two self-contained units and one room. The "converted dwelling and lodging house" can also become a rooming house when it reaches the occupancy levels noted in the other two definitions.

A rooming house, as defined in the Zoning By-Law, may be either a boarding or lodging house or a converted dwelling and lodging house, the distinction depending on

whether the property contains some self-contained dwelling units (in addition to a possible caretaker's suite), as well as boarding or lodging rooms. The converted dwelling and lodging house can also be a rooming house as defined by the Rooming House and Housing By-Laws, but in some instances it is not. Coincidence in the definition depends on the mix of number of self-contained units and number of rooms.

In addition, the zoning by-law deals exclusively with the limits on the maximum number of rooms depending on the area of the city where the rooming house is located. The limits are 6 rooms in R2 and R3 districts outside the Central Area and 12 in R4 and R4A districts. The zoning By-law also contains special provisions for South Parkdale that limit newly converted rooming houses to six rooms, although this is essentially a R4 district. These maximum rooms numbers are intended to limit the impact of rooming houses on their surrounding areas by restricting their size and/or occupancy. However, these additional regulations are redundant because the number of rooms is controlled by other conventional provisions of the by-laws. Although not explicitly stated, it will be limited by the permitted gross floor area, the minimum room size, and the various factors affecting the building envelope (i.e. the setbacks, height limits, building length limits and landscaped open space). Limitations on the number of rooms, when applied uniformly

across the City , create an arbitrary control on development because they do not relate to the local conditions. Many areas, by virtue of the size of the housing stock or building lots, could accommodate without detrimental impact a larger number of rooms in rooming houses.

The zoning by-law also sets the following parking requirements for rooming houses: 1 space for every 3 boarding or lodging rooms, or fraction thereof in excess of three; and 1 space for each of 2 dwelling units, or fraction thereof. The zoning By-Law also contains regulations with respect to other general residential standards such as setbacks, landscaped open space, etc. (Allester 1988 , 7).

The Ontario Fire Code. This provincial statute defines a rooming house as " a building where lodging is provided for more than three persons". Thus, another source of confusion arises when the definition of the Fire Code is introduced because while its minimum number of roomers is four, the Rooming and Housing By-Law sets the minimum number of roomers to five. Furthermore, the Fire Code cannot be applied to a room which has kitchen or sanitary facilities. However, the zoning and housing by-laws allow cooking equipment in sleeping rooms in some cases.

This maze of definitions, creates opportunities for some operators to slip between labels and to create illegal rooming houses. If for the purposes of the Zoning By-Law, the operator can avoid being classified as a boarding or lodging house or converted dwelling and lodging house and instead be regarded as a converted dwelling house or simply a one-family dwelling house, the operator will not have to meet all of the requirements of the zoning by-law which determine the maximum number of rooms and might even have a lower parking requirement. If for the purposes of the rooming house by-law, housing by-law and fire code, he or she can reduce occupancy significantly to below that stipulated for a "rooming house", then the operator does not need to be licensed (and therefore can avoid all sorts of inspections) and is exempted from the additional fire, safety and fitness for occupancy standards that would otherwise apply (Allester 1988, 6).

The following are two examples of how certain operators are avoiding the classification of their buildings as rooming houses. They operate what has been called a "quasi-rooming house" operations which are legal operations. A person might own a dwelling which contains one or more sets of culinary and sanitary facilities where several rooms are let separately to independent tenants. If the house contains only one kitchen (and an unspecified number of



washrooms), it could be argued, for the purposes of the zoning by-law, that the building is a one-family dwelling house because the floor plans would seem to indicate a single dwelling unit. If the house contains one kitchen and an equal or greater number of washrooms, it could be asserted to be a converted dwelling house containing whatever number of dwelling units corresponding with the number of kitchen/washrooms combinations (Allester, 1988, 6-7).

A second example is when an owner claims that none of the rented rooms are separate suites sharing some common facilities, but rather are components of one or more self-contained dwelling units in a converted dwelling house. In some cases, each of the self-contained units has been rented to five unrelated individuals for a total of 15 tenants in one house (Allester 1988, 7).

Generally, these "quasi-rooming houses" are overcrowded and they are not kept properly. They have been the object of protest by neighbors and the cause of the bad public image associated with rooming house accommodation. The operators of these "quasi-rooming houses", unlike the operators of licensed rooming houses, are able to make a profit in the day-to-day operation of the premises in

addition to the profit resulting from the rapid appreciation in the value of the property.

#### **B. The Size of Toronto's Rooming House Stock**

Licensed Rooming Houses. There are 622 licensed rooming house operations in the City of Toronto. Considering the average size of the rooming house to be 9.8 units<sup>1</sup>, there are 6,096 licensed rooming house units in the City (Table 1).

<sup>1</sup> This number was obtained by The Starr Group Planning and Management consultants from a review of the unpublished rooming house data files of the City of Toronto

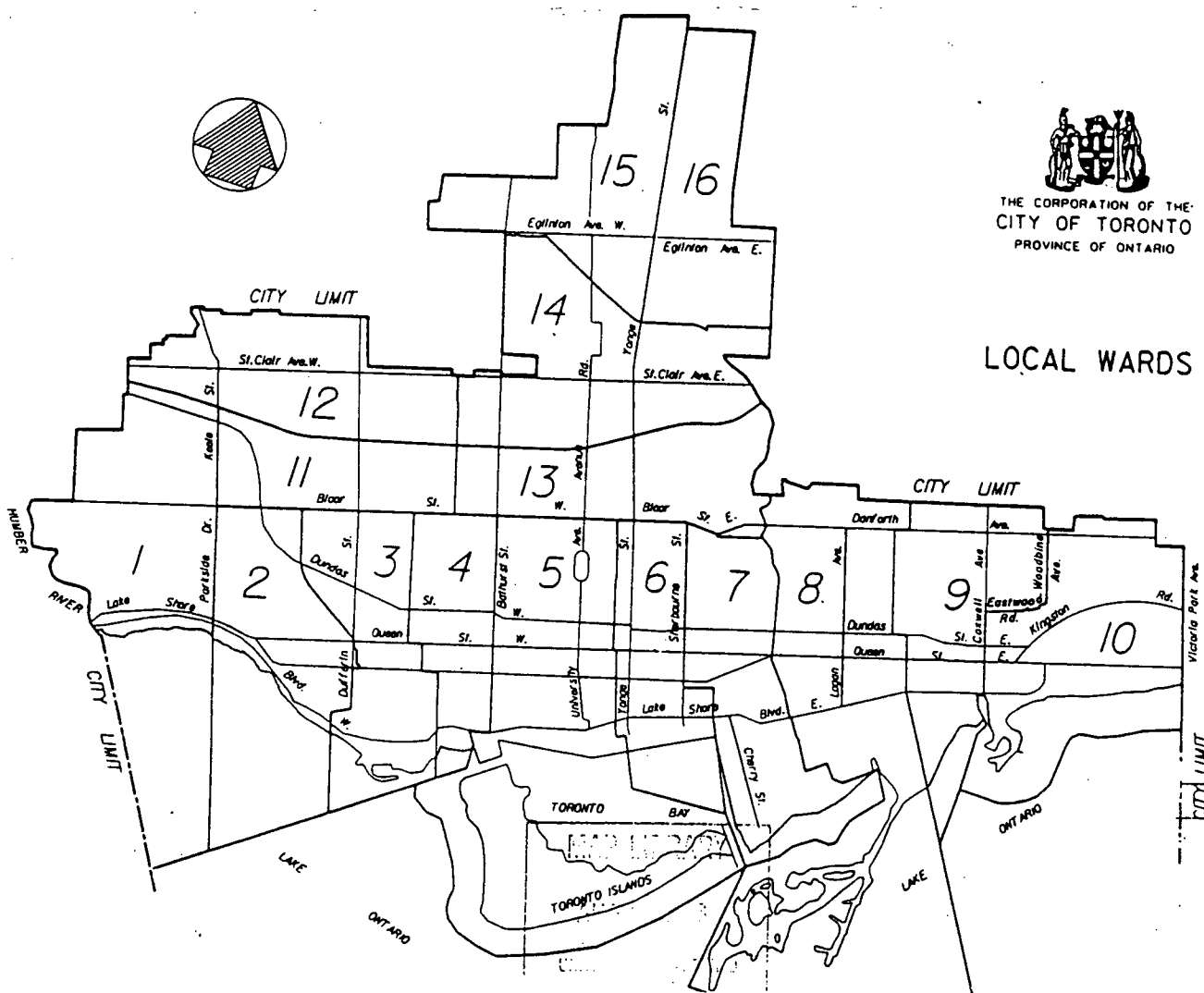
TABLE 1  
LICENSED ROOMING HOUSES, 1988

Ward	Licensed Rooming Houses	% City
1	18	3.0
2	89	14.3
3	19	3.0
4	45	7.0
5	148	24.3
6	130	20.7
7	109	18.0
8	18	2.5
9	18	2.5
10	22	3.7
11	6	1.0
TOTAL	622	100.0

Source: The Starr Group, The West End Rooming House Study,  
Toronto 1988.

Rooming houses in the City of Toronto are concentrated in several areas of the city around the downtown area. To the East of Yonge street rooming houses are located in the area bounded roughly by Queen, Yonge, Carlton and River St. and Queen and Broadview. West of Yonge street, rooming houses are concentrated around Queen and Spadina, College and Spadina, South Parkdale, and the Junction area (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1  
Map of the City of Toronto



Illegal Rooming Houses. The real number of rooming house units in the city is much larger than the number reflected by the data file of licensed rooming houses. There are several estimates of the non-licensed or illegal rooming house operations. The Building and Inspections Department of the City of Toronto estimates that the number of illegal rooming houses is approximately 25 to 33 percent of the legal activity. This percentage is based on files held by the Building and Inspections Departments containing the description of rooming houses against which complaints have been received. In addition, the Building and Inspections Department suggests that 136 rooming houses should be included in the estimates of illegal operations because it has conclusive evidence that these operations are illegal. This yields a total of 963 illegal rooming houses and 9,437 rooming house units (The Starr Group 1988, 17-18).

Michael Schapcott, a community worker at the Christian Resource Centre, estimates that in the East End of Toronto and in the Cabbagetown area, there are five or six non-licensed rooming houses for every licensed rooming house. In the West-End and Parkdale area of the city there are an estimated ten non-licensed rooming houses for every licensed rooming house (Michael Schapcott, Pers. Comm. November 29

1988). These estimates yield a total of 4,875 non-licensed rooming houses which represent 47,775 non-licensed rooming house units.

The combination of Schapcott's estimates of illegal rooming house units and of the number of licensed rooming houses units yields a total of 53,871 licensed and non-licensed rooming house units in the City of Toronto.

### **C. Trends in Rooming House Accommodation**

The supply of rooming houses has drastically decreased in the past 10 to 15 years. The number of rooming houses started to dwindle in the mid-70's coinciding with the start of gentrification in the inner city neighborhoods of Toronto where the rooming houses are concentrated. While the effect of gentrification on the supply of rooming houses is a well known fact (especially among roomers who find it increasingly difficult to rent a room), the data to support it is not very conclusive.

Problems with the rooming house data exist because records of rooming houses started to be collected at the time when gentrification started to occur. Moreover, there is no clear estimate of the number of illegal rooming houses which represent the bulk of the rooming house stock and thus

there is no "formal" way of assessing what has happened to these units as a result of gentrification.

Records from the Buildings and Inspections Department of the City of Toronto indicate that in 1976 it was estimated that at least 1,600 absentee-owned rooming houses across the city would require new licenses. However, only 622 licenses were in effect issued in 1977; 608 in 1978; 512 in 1979; and 397 in 1980 (The Starr Group 1988, 14). This progressive reduction in the number of rooming houses might indicate two things. First, that the licensing requirements were a burden for the operators and many chose to go underground. Second, the reduction in the number of rooming houses might indicate that the character of the neighborhood where the rooming houses were located was changing. These areas were gentrified by people attracted by the convenience of downtown living. Many rooming houses were bought and de-converted to single-family use (Bureau of Municipal Research 1982, 5).

The neighborhoods of Toronto undergoing gentrification during the 70's were Don Vale, the Annex, and Riverdale. Gentrification has also taken its toll of rooming houses in Parkdale, in the West End of the City, but sometime later, in the late 70's and early 80's especially during the last

five years. These areas coincide with the areas of highest concentration of rooming houses in the City.

Additional evidence of gentrification of Toronto's inner cities is provided by the the Housing Occupancy Analysis System (HOAS). This system detects changes in the total number of units as well as changes in the tenure of these units located in residential properties of the City of Toronto. This system collects data for self-contained units, but, it might also pick up some of the "quasi-rooming houses" which are located in the "converted dwelling" house. HOAS gives an indication of the changes in the rental stock located in the "converted dwelling" which is essentially the same housing stock where rooming houses locate. An examination of the data contained in the HOAS sheds light on the trends of one of the principal targets of the gentrification process: the stock of moderately priced rental accommodation held in single family homes. It can be said that these trends also apply to the rooming house stock since the buildings where rooming houses are located originally were single family homes.

Homes containing rental units have been deconverted by merging the units in previously subdivided homes. Roughly, 18,000 units were lost between 1976 and 1985 as a result of the deconversion process. Deconversions were at the highest



level during the 1976-78 period with losses averaging 2,700 units per annum. After subsiding somewhat, between 1979 and 1983, deconversion rose again in 1984, resulting in the loss of roughly 2,400 units. The area of North Riverdale was the one more affected by the deconversions (Howell 1986, 26-27).

Recent data covering the period between 1985 and 1988 indicates that over 1,400 units were lost as a result of deconversion. The bulk of the units lost due to deconversion could be considered to be part of the affordable rental stock. Although new rental units have been built during the period, the new units built have not replaced the affordable units lost and are priced beyond the reach of the displaced renters (Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto 1988, 4).

The municipal license datafile which contains numbers of rooming houses from 1982, indicates that the number of licensed rooming houses has remained stable between 1982 and 1988 (Table 2).

TABLE 2  
LICENSED ROOMING HOUSES 1982-1988

Ward	July	Mar	Aug	Mar	Jan	Nov	Mar	Mar
	1982	1983	1983	1984	1986	1986	1986	1988
1	22	25	20	20	23	29	21	18
2	77	77	85	78	86	108	91	89
3	15	14	11	18	13	25	21	19
4	30	34	37	48	43	58	47	45
5	168	154	182	182	148	192	169	144
6	151	149	140	163	113	164	136	131
7	97	106	119	128	107	139	128	110
8	12	7	12	13	16	19	18	18
9	7	10	6	8	14	18	18	18
10	26	24	25	22	17	21	22	22
11	9	5	8	7	5	9	7	6
TOTAL	614	605	645	687	585	782	678	620

SOURCE: Licenced Rooming House Files, Property Information, Department of Buildings and Inspections.  
The number of rooming houses for 1986 in this table exceeds the number of rooming houses in table 1 because the numbers in this table include rooming houses for which applications have been received but not yet approved.

\* The licensed rooming house data is available in a computer file on a property-by-property basis from July 1982 to January 1986. Before July 1982, only limited data is available.

#### D. Ownership of Rooming Houses

The ownership of licensed rooming houses can be classified in three categories: owner-occupied, representing 22% of the total licensed rooming house stock; absentee-owned which represented, 67% of the total licensed

rooming house stock; and non-profit which constitutes 11% of the licensed rooming house stock (Table 3).

TABLE 3  
OWNERSHIP OF LICENSED ROOMING HOUSES, 1988

Ward	Classs*			Total
	1	2	3	
1	5	12	1	18
2	21	58	7	86
3	6	12	0	18
4	9	31	2	42
5	31	102	10	143
6	31	88	12	131
7	6	70	31	107
8	4	11	3	18
9	1	17	0	18
10	15	6	0	21
11	4	2	1	7
TOTAL	133	409	67	609
percentage	22	67	11	100.0

1= rooming house in which the registered owner occupies a dwelling area of at least 250 ft<sup>2</sup> as a personal residence.

2= rooming house where the owner does not live in the premises

3= rooming house which is occupied by a co-operative or a non-profit organization.

SOURCE: The Starr Group, West End Rooming House Study  
Toronto, 1988

Owner-occupied properties are those where the owner of the rooming house lives in the rooming house. Usually, these operators have been in the business for many years, (ranging from 8 to 18 years) and only ran one rooming house. The majority of the licensed rooming houses, however, are operated by absentee landlords who live outside the premises but generally manage the buildings themselves. The absentee-owner rooming house operators were more likely to have recently entered the rooming house business. Non-profit rooming houses are owned and operated by community-based non-profit agencies which receive funding from the provincial and municipal government for the rehabilitation and operation of their rooming houses. In addition to these categories, there is an extra one, the absentee landlord who owns illegal rooming houses. These operators have usually entered the business recently and they have been attracted by the prospects of capital gains in the "hot" real estate market (The Starr Group 1988, 25).

Historic data indicates that the ownership of the rooming houses is shifting steadily away from owner occupation and toward absentee ownership. A survey of rooming houses undertaken in 1974 indicated that at the time 31% of the rooming houses had "resident owner" this percentage has decreased since then. As of March 1988, the

data indicates that 22% of the licensed rooming houses had a resident owner in the premises (The Starr Group 1988, 15).

A recent study of the rooming house stock in the West End of Toronto indicated that there is little evidence, if any, of concentration of ownership in any of the categories. Moreover, there was no evidence that large corporations owned a large amount of rooming houses in the West End (The Starr Group 1988, 15). With respect to the rooming house stock of the rest of the city, it was the general feeling among community workers in the rooming house sector that within the City of Toronto there was no widespread corporate ownership of rooming houses (Michael Shapcott, Pers. Comm. November 29, 1988).

Corporate ownership of rooming houses, however, is predominant in the City of North York. Residential properties along Yonge Avenue, North of Sheppard where there is major redevelopment taking place, corporations like Tridell developments are buying up entire blocks of bungalows and turning them into illegal rooming houses (the municipality of North York does not have a by-law for rooming houses, and therefore all rooming house operations are illegal). These homes are located in areas adjacent to the Yonge and Sheppard area where major commercial redevelopment is taking place. These properties are held

for speculative purposes while zoning changes are introduced to allow further redevelopment.

#### **E. The Physical Condition of the Rooming House Stock**

The physical condition of the rooming house stock and the level of amenities provided is directly related to the type of ownership of the rooming house and legal status of the property. Licensed rooming houses offer higher quality housing than illegal operations because the safety and health standards are enforced. It has been found that among the licensed rooming houses, the majority of the operators (either living in the premises or outside the premises) undertook their own management and most maintained the building themselves. Also, most of the rooming houses provided some common facilities in addition to bathroom and common kitchen facilities. These ranged from laundry facilities to living rooms to access to porches or backyards (The Starr Group 1988, 25).

Within the licensed rooming houses, non-profit operators offer a higher level of common facilities and support services. Most non-profit rooming houses contain several common facilities, e.g. shared kitchen, storage facilities, a t.v. and or recreation room, a backyard, a dining room etc. The non-profit rooming houses cater to those in social assistance who might also be handicapped.

Their mandate as a non-profit corporation use the available funds to provide additional services and common areas.

The stock of illegal rooming houses presents more problems with respect to the upkeep of the property. While not all the non-licensed rooming houses might be poorly managed, there are some whose landlords are strictly concerned with reaping monetary profits but do not wish to invest any profits in the maintenance of the property. These operators make a profit in the daily operation of the rooming house because they fill the premises to maximum capacity and have no expenses for the maintenance of the building. These illegal operations frequently provide shelter to the lowest income groups; better maintained premises can afford to be more selective in light of the high demand for accommodation for singles. These poorly-run operations are the ones which have caused neighborhood opposition and are responsible for the negative view that rooming houses have in the public's mind.

The residents who participated on the survey of the study of rooming houses in the West End of Toronto expressed their discontentment with some with some of the rooming house operations in their neighborhood. The residents felt that some of these absentee-owned illegal operations were overcrowded, noisy, and generally were poorly maintained. In

these premises, there was inadequate control over garbage and the exterior of the property was neglected. Because these properties were absentee-owned, the residents felt that they did not know whom to contact regarding these problems. Overall, these residents did not oppose rooming houses per se , but wanted to see them better controlled. The residents recognized that rooming houses provide much needed accommodation, however, they feel that this objective should not be met at the expense of the quality of life in their neighborhood.

**F. Two major issues: The Economics of the Rooming House Operation and the Regulatory Environment**

The Economics of The Rooming House Operation. The economics of the rooming house operation constitute an important factor in determining the viability of the rooming house stock in the city of Toronto and consequently its continued availability. It has been found when the equity appreciation of the property is not taken into consideration, the typical licensed rooming house is operating at a deficit on a day-to-day basis. The absentee-owned rooming house is able to defray the deficit to some extent by renting out the permitted self-contained unit in the house. The owner, in that case, must then add the cost of his or her own accommodation. Illegal rooming



houses are able to make a profit in the day-to-day operations because they house a very high number of tenants and do not reinvest in the maintenance of the property.

The daily deficit is particularly great for rooming houses located in R2 districts, where the number of rooms are restricted to six plus one self-contained unit. The rooming houses located in R4 areas, where they are permitted up to 12 rooms and one self-contained unit experience positive operating returns.

When equity appreciation due to factors such as inflation in the real estate market, capital improvements in the properties and pay-down of principal on the mortgage are included in the calculations of the operation of rooming houses, the results are such that investment in rooming house operations appears more attractive. The study of the rooming houses in the West End of Toronto provides an example of a licensed rooming house operating at a deficit of \$17,360 per year. With a 37.3% annum inflation in real estate values (as of May of 88), the owner would earn an additional  $\$265,000 \times .373 = \$98,845$  per year in capital appreciation. Thus, the annual earnings would be  $\$98,845 - 17,360 = \$81,485$ . Given the original down payment of \$66,000, the return on investment would be 123.4% per annum (The Starr Group 1988, 62).

Property values have escalated rapidly in Toronto in the past few years. The Toronto Real Estate Board reports that, between September 1986 and May 1988, the average resale price of residential properties in the City of Toronto was 58% increase. The average resale price of residential properties for the West End of Toronto, where a large number of rooming houses are located was 80% increase. Although rooming houses might not be "flipped" for an extraordinary gain, their value is inflating about the same rate as the market as a whole and even higher.

There is evidence which indicates that the illegal rooming house operations are able to make a profit in the day-to-day operation of the premises. This is the case because these operations usually house a greater number of tenants illegally, up to 15. It has been found that a property purchased in 1987 can be run at a profit of some 17% per annum without considering equity appreciation. The report regarding rooming houses in the West End of Toronto found that these illegal properties changed owners frequently in a short period of time. In one case, a property changed hands twice from early 1988 to mid-1988 escalating by 41.1% in 6 months, or 82.2% per annum with downpayments averaging 17.7% or 53,250. The mortgage on the property was \$251,150 and principal and interest payments

were of about 2,700 per month. Even assuming that these properties were operating at no more than break-even, the ultimate return to the investor is extremely lucrative when the real estate gains are applied. The entire operation appears even more attractive when one considers the additional favorable tax treatment of capital gains (The Starr Group 1988, 63-64).

Thus, for both licensed and illegal rooming house operations, the financial incentive of entering in the rooming house market is very much a function of the real estate market conditions. Capital appreciation in property values is the key factor which generates the attractive return on investment. The rapid escalating property values in Toronto are a strong incentive for investment in the rooming house sector. The current supply of rooming house units in the City of Toronto is highly dependent on the operation of the real estate market. Landlords are encouraged to purchase homes and operate them as rooming houses while they await to sell the property and to reap the profits from the increased value of the property. The steady long term capital appreciation of real estate values in the Toronto area has been the key factor in maintaining the viability of the existing private licensed rooming house operations.

The Regulatory Environment. The licensing requirements of rooming houses began in 1974 following a number of fires in rooming houses. The licensing requirements were developed to ensure standards which protect the well-being of the residents and to ensure that rooming houses are compatible with local residential neighborhoods.

The current procedure for licensing can be very lengthy and it requires the input of several different departments.

The initial application for a license is submitted to the Buildings Department. Comments are requested from the Fire Department, the Public Health Department and the Buildings Inspections Department itself. The Toronto Fire Department inspects the building to see if it meets safety requirements under the Ontario Fire Code. The Health Department makes an inspection to determine if it meets standards under the Health Promotion Act. Finally, the Buildings and Inspections staff examine whether or not it meets housing standards, the zoning by-law and plumbing and building standards. The Fire Department will not inspect the property unless it complies with the zoning by-law. If a property owner needs to go to the Committee of Adjustment, the process of licensing will be slowed down until the property conforms the zoning.

If the building does not comply with all the requirements, then a hearing is set up. At this hearing the owner of the property is present as well as representatives from the different departments involved in issuing the license. The member of City Council representing the Ward where the property is located can also be present at the hearing.

Changes in the licensing procedure introduced in May of 1988 allow the licensing commissioner to suspend or revoke the renewal of rooming house licenses on the basis of the past conduct of the operator. It is the general feeling among members of the City Planning Department that the lengthy and complicated procedure for licensing might be discouraging some from entering the "legal" realm of the rooming house operation and opting for operating illegal rooming houses. The Planning Department has recommended that the licensing procedures be simplified by creating a single department which would co-ordinate the functions of all the departments currently involved in approving a rooming house license. These proposals have not been approved by City Council at the time of writing this thesis.

Licensed rooming houses face a deficit in the day-to-day operations. Illegal rooming houses can make a profit because they usually house more tenants. Rapid appreciation

of the properties in an "active" real estate market such as the one in Toronto, makes the investment in rooming house operations an attractive venture. This investment might just be temporary, as long as the real estate market conditions are favourable.

The licensing procedures for rooming houses are lengthy and complicated. The planning department has introduced some recent changes affecting licensing procedures and land use regulations to ease these regulatory burdens.

The licensed rooming house stock has remained stable since 1982. However, there was a great decrease in the number of rooming houses in the mid 70's and early 80's as a result of gentrification of inner city neighborhoods. It is difficult to assess the exact number of rooming house units in the City of Toronto because so many of them are not licensed. The number of illegal operations is much greater than the legal ones. Many of the illegal rooming houses have been the result of the lack of uniformity in the definition of a rooming house in the corresponding municipal by-laws.

### 3.3 The Residents of Toronto's Rooming Houses

#### A. Socio-Economic Characteristics

Gender. The rooming house population consists of 60% men and 40% women (The Starr Group 1988, 25a). In the early 70's, the population of rooming houses consisted of 77% males and 23% females (McMaster and Browne 1973, 8)

Age. The largest percentage of rooming house residents are in the age category of 35 to 54 years old. The percentage of residents in the category of "less than 35 years old" has increased in recent years. In 1973 it was found that 18% of the surveyed rooming house population were in the "less than 35 years old" category (McMaster and Browne 1973, 8). In 1988 it has been found that 42% of the surveyed rooming house population belonged to the "less than 35 years old" category (The Starr Group 1988, 25a).

Education. The roomers living in rooming houses now have higher level of education than in the past. In 1973, less than 8% of the roomers had completed their education beyond the secondary school level; and just over 62% had completed nine years of schooling (McMaster and Browne 1973, 8). In 1988, 76% of the residents had completed post-secondary education (The Starr Group 1988, 25a).

Employment. The majority of the residents of non-profit projects were employed mainly in the service sector. The jobs included working in car washes, delivering hand bills, providing home or kitchen help, security guard, and caretaker ( Alternative Housing Committee, 1986, 30).

The residents of market units were employed in a wider range of part-time and full-time jobs in the following areas: construction, service sector, office work, retail sales, mechanical engineering, and data entry (The Starr Group 1988, 26).

Unemployment among rooming house residents has been persistent over time. The percentage of unemployed is higher in social housing units than in market units. A survey of the rooming houses owned by Cityhome<sup>2</sup> reveals that 73% of the residents between the ages of 36 and 54 are not part of the labor force. Sixty one percent of the residents in this group indicated that they were not working because they had permanent health problems (Alternative Housing Subcommittee 1986, 34). For rooming houses in the private market, the percentage of residents not in the labor force was lower, approximately 40% (The Starr Group 1988, 25a).

<sup>2</sup>Cityhome is the social housing agency of the City of Toronto.



Income. The unemployed residents of rooming houses receive social assistance sources. The average annual income for an unemployed roomer on social assistance is \$5,604 a year which is the maximum annual welfare payment for a single employable male (Ministry of Community and Social Services, 1988). The annual income range for the "working" residents ranges \$9,500 and \$10,800. The figure of \$10,800 reflects the income received by those residents of market units who are employed in a wider range of occupations (The Starr Group 1988, 27). The \$9,500 constitutes the annual income for a minimum wage job in Ontario. This figure is representative of the income received by residents of non-market units since the majority of them are employed in service sector jobs which traditionally pay the minimum wage.

#### **B. Rooming Houses: Permanent or Temporary Accommodation**

The traditional belief that people living in rooming houses lead a transient lifestyle is not supported by the results of the rooming house studies of the City of Toronto. The residents of rooming houses do not choose to move, but are forced to do so.

The survey of Cityhome's rooming houses indicated that 87% of the respondents had lived in their current place for more than a year; 65% of the residents had lived in their

previous market rooming house for up to 5 years. The majority of the residents responded that they would like to remain in their units; they viewed their present accommodation as permanent. This strong commitment to their housing might be strongly related to the fact that the units were social housing units and the residents had the security that they could live there as long as they wanted (Alternative Housing Subcommittee 1986, 41).

In market rooming houses, there was a greater mix of short-term and long-term residents. Forty percent of the respondents had lived at their current address for 2 years or more; 47% had lived in their current accommodation one year or less (The Starr Group 1988, 26a).

The residents of rooming houses face powerful displacement pressures which force them to move frequently and might incorrectly classify them as transients. The following were the most frequently stated reasons for moving from a rooming house accommodation to another:

- (1) property conversion was mentioned most often. Conversion refers to the changes in the property from the house being sold or demolished or to the death of the landlord.

- (2) the physical condition of the building. The residents had to move because they were concerned about the physical condition of the property. These concerns include comments like the place was cold, there were bugs, gas leaks, "it was a shed", there was no heat, no kitchen, there were mice, etc.

(3) other reasons included: eviction, change of income, the lease expired, and sudden increase in rent (Alternative Housing Subcommittee 1986, 42) .

These responses indicate that transiency is forced upon the rooming house residents. Transiency is the result of strong external pressures which are beyond the control of the resident. The residents of rooming houses might be transient in the sense that they will live in a room for a long period of time; they are not transient in the sense that although they might move constantly, they still live in rooms.

### **C. Satisfaction with Rooming House Accommodation**

Residents of rooming houses are generally satisfied with their accommodation. The most the positive factor associated with rooming houses is location. Residents like to live close to transportation, shopping, social services, and place of work. Lower rents are also a major asset of rooming house accommodation. The poor upkeep and maintenance of the property, noise and the presence of bugs are among the negative aspects associated with living in rooming houses. Female respondents expressed their concern regarding personal safety. In general, the residents of rooming houses would prefer to have their own self-contained apartment where they could have their own cooking, food storage, and bathroom facilities ( The Starr Group 1988, 28; Alternative Housing Subcommittee 1986, 45-47).

#### **D. Are Rooming House Units Affordable ?**

Affordability of these units will be considered in light of the income received by roomers and of the average rents of the units. The average rent for a rooming house unit is \$350 a month or \$4,200 a year. There are two main sources of income for residents of non-profit rooming house units: minimum wage jobs and welfare payments. The maximum annual welfare payment for a single employable male is \$5,604. The annual maximum income for a minimum wage job is \$9,500. The average income for employed rooming house residents is approximately \$10,800.

Residents whose income is equivalent to the minimum wage pay 50% of their income on rent; those residents receiving welfare payments pay 75% of their incomes on rent. For those employed in jobs with wages above the minimum wage, pay 40% of their income on housing. It has been reported that of all the employed tenants in private market rooming houses, 52% pay more than 40% of their income in rent and that, of these, 35% spend between 45% and 54% of their incomes on housing. Roomers in rent geared to income units in rooming houses of social housing projects pay approximately 30% of their income in housing (Alternative Housing Committee 1986, 38). These figures indicate that rooming houses are still expensive for very low incomes

tenants, even though rooming houses are the most affordable of all rental units. Rent geared-to-income units are the most affordable units in the rooming house stock.

### **3.4 Policy and Program Actions of The City of Toronto.**

The City Administration's approach to issues relating to the Single Room Occupancy housing stock can be best described as ambivalent. On the one hand the city has enacted a number of regulations and controls directed at curtailing rooming house operations. These controls, in the early 1980's caused the virtual disappearance of the bachelorette units and decreased the ability of the rooming house stock to provide affordable units. In 1988, the city again took action against rooming house accommodation by enacting an interim control by-law which prohibited the new creation of rooming houses in the West End of the City for a six month period. In both instances, these reactions by the City were prompted by the pressure from neighborhood residents regarding certain rooming house operations. These residents were concerned that rooming houses were detrimental to the character of the neighborhood. Controls on rooming house operations emerged with little consideration of the potential consequences to the housing situation of low income singles. The closure of bachelorette units and the imposition of stronger restrictions on the

existing rooming house stock, has aggravated the housing situation for many low income singles.

This restrictive environment for rooming house accommodation might be on its way to becoming more relaxed if the recommendations presented by the planning department are accepted by City Council. These recommendations are based on the results of a study of the role of rooming house accommodation in the West End of Toronto of Toronto.

The City of Toronto through its non-profit housing agency, City Home, is the largest rooming houses landlord in the City. These rooming houses were acquired in 1974 in an effort to save these affordable units from being demolished.

#### **A. Actions Against Bachelorettes**

Starting in the mid-70's, the City of Toronto undertook a number of actions against existing bachelorette accommodation. When enacting these controls, the city administration was reacting to internal and external pressures. Resident groups in South Parkdale began putting pressure on the City administration to impose controls to stop further conversions of bachelorette accommodation. These residents expressed their concern regarding the effect that the lack of property upkeep in the buildings which

contained bachelorettes was having a negative influence on the property values of the area.

In addition to this external pressure, there was also internal pressure within the City administration. Politicians and administrators were concerned about the number of units which were illegal. The city seemed to be unable to convert the spread of illegal units and to enforce effective bylaws (Bureau of Municipal Research 1982, 11). The pressures from the City administration and from residents groups prompted the city to act in three different ways against the bachelorette accommodation:

(i) Reclassification of Bachelorettes. Under the 1977 Assessment Act, the buildings in which bachelorettes were created had been traditionally assessed as rooming houses since this was the original use of the property. In the fall of 1977 the bachelorettes were assessed as apartment buildings. This change in the classification had the effect of tripling the previous assessed value of the building. As a result, the taxes of the bachelorette buildings had tripled.

(ii) Restrictions on the zoning bylaws affecting the converted dwelling house and the rooming house which were the vehicles used to create bachelorettes. The new zoning bylaws imposed limits on the maximum size of the rooming house operations, on the maximum size of the rooms of the rooming houses, and they imposed more stringent parking requirements. These actions had the combined effect of decreasing the ability of the rooming house accommodation to be converted into bachelorette units and thus decreasing the number of rental units available for single people in Toronto. This particular action by the City was severely criticized in a report written by the Bureau of Municipal Research.

This report stated that these restrictions on rooming houses and converted dwelling houses were detrimental to the overall rental housing market for low income singles. In 1981, approximately 25% of the rental units were found in converted dwelling houses. These units usually were moderately priced rental apartments. The Bureau stated that rather than imposing strict control, the regulatory measures should be relaxed in order to foster this type of affordable rental units.

#### **B. Interim Control By-Law**

In March of 1988, City Council passed an interim control by-law no 271-88 prohibiting, for a six month period further rooming houses and conversions in Wards 1,2,3,4, (essentially the entire West End of the city). This interim control by-law was later amended so that it applied only to absentee-owned rooming houses. Rooming houses owned by non-profit groups were excluded from this interim control by-law. The prohibition of new rooming houses was in place in order that a study of the land use planning policies pertaining to the subject uses in the affected areas could be undertaken.

This by-law was drafted as a result of apprehension shared by politicians and residents in the West End of Toronto area regarding some rooming house operations.



Politicians and residents perceived that one or more companies in the West End of Toronto were creating rooming houses illegally through converted dwellings and that this was done at a large scale. The alderman who proposed the creation of this by-law was responding to the complaints of residents of her ward who were concerned with the effect of these rooming houses on the character and stability of their neighborhood. The complaints focussed on the disruptive behavior of the residents, the lack of parking, the poor maintenance and the poor upkeep of the property.

The terms of reference provided by Council for the land use study to be undertaken by the planning department essentially required that a study be done of the land use controls that were in place pertaining to "boarding and lodging houses", "converted dwelling houses" and "converted dwelling and lodging houses" in R2 districts within the West End of the City. It was perceived that these land use controls were deficient and this deficiency was the cause of the rooming house problems. David Allester, the planner in charge of undertaking the study suggested that these terms of reference be altered to include a broader focus. He proposed that a study of rooming houses in Toronto should address issues such as occupancy, maintenance standards, licensing requirements and means of enforcement of these licensing requirements. David Allester felt that one cannot

deal with the regulatory environment affecting rooming house operations in isolation of their role in the community and in the broader housing market. The original terms of reference were altered to include the following: perception of the residents, the neighbors, the politicians , the operators, of the rooming house accommodation and to determine the role of the different levels of government in the operation of rooming house accommodation.

Based on the results of the consultant's study, the planning department of the City of Toronto has made the following recommendations to City Council:

(i) To Harmonize the Definition of Rooming House used in the Rooming House, Housing, and Zoning by-laws. It has been proposed that the term rooming house be changed to "dwelling house" containing "dwelling units". The recommended definition for a "dwelling unit" is: "living accommodation comprising a single housekeeping unit, consisting of a room or suite of two or more rooms designed or intended for use as living accommodation for one or more persons living together and in which culinary and sanitary conveniences are provided for the exclusive use of such person or persons".

The purpose of this change in the definition has been to enable owners of "quasi-rooming houses" to obtain building permits and operate what, in practice, are over-occupied converted dwelling houses. The key aim is to require these properties to become licensed. Once these premises are licensed, they can be regularly monitored and the operators can be held accountable for their activities.

(ii) To Change the Licensing Requirements for Rooming Houses. It has been proposed that as a condition for licensing, every rooming house owner has to designate an agent who will either reside in the premises or within 300 meters of the premises. This agent will represent the owner. The name and address of the agent should be posted in the rooming house, so tenants can call this person, if there are any problems. This particular licensing requirement is still pending approval but an additional change has already been introduced.

The Rooming House By-law was amended in May 1988 to provide discretion to the licensing commissioner to refuse to issue a license on the basis of the past conduct of the operator. This amendment enables the licensing commissioner to investigate any previous convictions against the owner for offenses under the by-laws regulating the licensing of rooming houses; the records and disposition of complaints

against the owner by federal, provincial, or municipal authorities; complaints by tenants in buildings owned by the owner, or by adjacent neighbors, or by other persons having knowledge of the manner in which the owner operated dwellings or permitted them to be operated.

(iii) To Coordinate the Licensing Process. The rooming house operation in Toronto would benefit greatly from the establishment of a single department responsible for the different municipal functions affecting rooming houses. This department would facilitate the licensing procedures, provide information regarding provincial grants for rooming house rehabilitation and building code requirements, and would provide assistance in renting the units through the City's housing registry.

#### **C. The Rooming House Program of Cityhome**

City Home is the non-profit housing corporation of the City of Toronto. Cityhome was created in 1974 and since then it has become the leading producer of assisted housing in the City of Toronto. Its portfolio now includes 59 housing projects and 365 scattered houses serving 13,500 tenants in 5,246 units (Housing Policy Review Committee 1986, 4). In 1979 Cityhome acquired 53 rooming houses in the Cabbagetown area Parliament/Sherbourne area. These rooming houses were owned by Meridian corporation and were going to be

demolished and replaced by high rise rental apartment buildings. The administration of the City of Toronto, responding to community pressure acquired these properties. The purchase of these rooming houses was seen as a way to stop gentrification which was seen as the major cause for the loss of affordable housing stock.

These 53 rooming houses contain a mix of rooms and self-contained units for a total of 352 units which approximately house 352 single men and women. These properties have been renovated and brought up to building code standards. Ninety percent of the tenants in these rooming houses receive income assistance. The waiting list ranges between 100 and 500 people at any given time. A single property manager manages all the rooming houses. The homes are supervised by unionized cleaning staff. There are no in-residence operators.

These rooming houses have contained market units as well as subsidized units. The rent-geared-to-income subsidy covers up to the point where the tenant pays 25-30% of their income on rent. The Rent-Geared-to-Income program is funded through the provincial rent supplement and through grants from the municipal government.

#### **D. The City of Toronto's Housing Registry Program**

The City of Toronto operates a Housing Registry Program which started in 1984. Under this program a Vacancy List of all sorts of rental accommodation is produced. This list is circulated in the Public Libraries of the City of Toronto, the University of Toronto, Ryerson Polytechnic Institute, and Social Services agencies. This housing registry is considered to be both a service for the landlord as well as a service for the people in search of accommodation. There is a monthly rental limit on the units advertised, no luxury rental accommodation is advertised in the registry. The rent for one-bedroom apartments ranges from \$500 to \$700 a month. The rooms advertised in this registry must be from licensed rooming house operations and the rent ranges from approximately \$45 a week to \$500 a month. There is a check on active files for every property advertised in the registry. This check is done to see if there are any problems with the units with respect of maintenance of standards.

### **3.5 Provincial Legislation and Housing Programs**

#### **Directed to the SRO Stock.**

The provincial government of Ontario has adopted two strategies directed to protect and to enhance rooming house accommodation and its tenants:

1. provincial legislation

2. housing programs to build new rooming house units and to acquire and preserve the existing ones.

Regulatory controls have been developed in three areas: The Rental Housing Protection Act (RHPA) directed to protect the existing rental housing stock; the Landlord and Tenant Protection Act (LTA) enacted to protect the residential tenancy rights of tenants; and a housing policy statement which encourages municipalities to make the necessary changes in their land use policies to intensify the use of their residential stock while providing affordable housing. Moreover, the Ontario government is currently investigating "right of entry" powers in order to cut exercise better control of the illegal rooming house dwellings.

The first two regulatory measures have been in place for some time now and it is possible to determine their major shortcomings. The third one has been announced recently and although there have been some criticisms, there has not been sufficient time to be able to asses the full impact of the policy statement on rooming house accommodation. The fourth one is still being elaborated.

The exclusion from the RHPA of rental buildings of less than four units and the discretionary use of the evaluation criteria by the local administrations judging the conversion

applications have been found to be the major causes for the continued loss of rooming house units. The lengthy process required under the LTA to appeal the illegal evictions has proven to be a major obstacle for the efficient operation of this legislation.

Provincial funding from the Ministry of Housing has enabled non-profit community groups to adopt three main strategies which include rooming house units:

1. the acquisition of already existing rooming houses, renovating them and removing them from the market by placing them under the ownership of a non-profit corporation.
2. the creation of rooming houses in the traditional housing stock of converted dwelling homes, wherever the zoning allows.
3. the new construction of shared accommodation in "rooming house-like form" in new non-profit housing projects

These initiatives have been funded under the bilateral federal/provincial non-profit housing program and under other unilateral housing programs funded exclusively by the province of Ontario. Three examples of rehabilitation of rooming houses and construction of new units will be provided. In addition to the social housing programs, the Ontario government also provides funding to private owners of rooming houses to upgrade the premises through the Low Rise Rental Rehabilitation Program.



### A. The Rental Housing Protection Act.

The Rental Housing Protection Act (RHPA) was introduced into the Ontario Legislative Assembly by the Hon. Alvin Curling on May 5 and enacted on July 10, 1986 in response to a growing shortage of affordable rental housing, specifically, to the belief that the affordable rental stock was being lost to condominium conversions, conversions to other uses, demolition and luxury renovations at a faster pace than it was being created.

At the time the RHPA was created it contained a "sunset clause" which set the expiration date for June 30, 1988 approximately 2 years from the date it was enacted. It is believed that the "sunset clause" was added because the RHPA was viewed as an emergency legislation intruding upon the property rights of rental landlords and the planning prerogatives of municipalities. In April 1988, the Minister of Housing, Chaviva Hosek, extended the RHPA to June 30, 1989. Simultaneously, the Minister requested that individuals and organizations submit their views regarding the RHPA because the provincial government intended to include these views in the development of future actions with respect to the protection of the rental stock.

Rooming houses are included in the RHPA, however, there are three main flaws in this legislation which contribute to

the continued loss of rooming house units. First vacant buildings are exempt from the RHPA. Second buildings with less than four units are also exempted from the RHPA. And thirdly, the discretionary application of the RHPA criteria by municipal councils which has provided an additional channel for the loss rooming houses.

Building Size Exclusions. The RHPA applies to all buildings with more than four units, thus exempting smaller rental buildings from conversion protection. This exemption is responsible for the continued losses of rental units located in "plexes" of two to four unit buildings. Roomers may have been the biggest losers as a result of this exemption. In the City of Toronto 66 rooms have been removed from the stock and only 17 rooms added since the RHPA legislation was enacted on July 1986. Additional 57 rooms have been lost in apartments that were for room rental. These "rooms" have been converted to self-contained units (Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto 1988, 26). The loss of these units in particular can be directly attributed to this exemption of the RHPA.

Vacancy Deprotection. The RHPA does not cover vacant buildings. This exemption has encouraged landlords to harass their tenants to force them to vacate the premises. The prospect that landlords would deliberately empty their

buildings was not initially considered when the RHPA was drafted. The lax protection of tenancy rights in rooming houses further aggravates the problem and it contributes to buildings becoming vacant and therefore making them primary targets for conversion to another residential use.

A study undertaken by the Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto found that ten applications for conversion of rental buildings had been exempted from the RHPA because they were vacant. The province of Quebec, for example, requires that a rental building, or dwelling be vacant, for ten years before it becomes eligible for an application for conversion. It is recommended that a similar provision be included in the Ontario legislation (The Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto 1988, xx).

Greedy landlords are willing to go through a great deal of effort to vacate their buildings. The owner of a twenty four-unit rooming house located in Borden street in Toronto is a case in point. Jose Rafael bought the property onn September 30 of 1987 with plans to renovate the building. At the time of the purchase, the rooms were renting for \$100 a week. The demolition work began in October. It started in the basement and continued to the first and second floors of the three storey building. In the meantime, the owner had not issued eviction notices to the tenants and had not

applied for a demolition permit. In November, the heat, water and electrical power were shut off and the fuses were pulled. Among the tenants living in this rooming house there was a young couple and their one month-old baby. City inspectors declared the building unsafe and everyone moved out except for one tenant. With vacancy rates for the City of Toronto as low as 0.2%, these tenants faced a great deal of difficulty in trying to replace their accommodation. At the present time, the building is empty, boarded up, and the owner has been fined \$35,000 for violating the LTA and the RHPA (The Globe and Mail, August 3, 1989). The fine is quite small compared with the profit derived from the real estate appreciation of the property during the one year period. It has been estimated that residential properties in the City of Toronto have appreciate 50% per year during the 1986-1988 period.

**Discretionary approval process of municipal councils.**

All aspects of the RHPA are administrated by the municipalities. A small secretariat and an analyst in the Rent Review Policy Branch oversee municipal administration for the provincial government. Appeals of the local municipal decisions are made to the Ontario Municipal Board. A municipal council can approve an application to allow conversion, demolition, or renovation if the application meets at least one of the following criteria:

1. council may approve the application if the building is found to be unsafe and unfit for human habitation and will continue to be so if the proposed renovations are not carried out
2. where the proponent has provided satisfactory accommodation for the current tenants and has provided comparable rental housing at the same price in the same area
3. if according to council's opinion, the proposal does not adversely affect the supply of affordable rental housing in the municipality. ( Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto 1988 p. XV)

A review of the applications for conversions, demolitions, and renovations submitted to municipal councils across the province revealed that the majority of the applications which have been considered favorable for conversion by either the planning staff or city council have been on grounds that they satisfied criteria number 3. In other words, it was estimated by the administrative body reviewing the applications that the conversion and demolition of these units posed no severe threat effect on the affordable housing stock of the City. With critical vacancy rates of 0.1 in the city of Toronto and in the Metropolitan area, one questions the rational of councils' decision. With such low vacancy rates, the removal of even one unit from the rental stock must be considered to be a great threat for the tenant population. In one occasion criterion number 3 was applied correctly when a rental structure was replaced by a social housing project which added a greater number of affordable housing units in the

rental market (Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto 1988 p XV).

In another occasion approval was granted for the replacement of an 18-unit rooming house by a project containing 26 apartments. This conversion was allowed under criterion 1. The problem with this type of approval is that the replacement units are more expensive than the initial units, this has obviously overlooked when the criterion was established. Low income roomers cannot afford the new rental units (Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto 1988 28).

There are many still many flaws in the RHPA legislation which permit continued leakages of affordable rental accommodation into the condominium ownership or luxury rental housing. This legislation must be improved to make it more effective regarding the protection of affordable rental units, particularly those located in smaller rental buildings, either rooming houses or plexes.

Improvement of the RHPA can be achieved by taking into account the input from community groups currently assessing this legislation. The Ministry of Housing together with the Federation of Metro Tenants' Associations (FMTA), the Federation of Ottawa-Carleton Tenants' Associations and the

Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto have already published the results of a study on the effectiveness of the RHPA. The findings and recommendations of this report will constitute the basis for the reformulation of the current rental protection policy once the current policy in place expires in June of 1989.

### **B. The Landlord and Tenant Act**

The Landlord and Tenant Act was approved on July of 1987. It excludes non-profit rental accommodation. The introduction of this legislation in the province of Ontario was brought about by pressure from grassroots groups and roomers associations across Ontario. This community interest was set in motion by the public hearings held by the Task Force that published the Barristow report on the housing needs of low income singles in Ontario written in 1987.

The political wheels began to turn in response to this grass-roots pressure. David Rebel, the NDP housing critic introduced Bill 10 in the Legislature. This political move placed a great deal of pressure on Ontario's attorney general Ian Scott who drafted the LTA.

Despite the availability of the Landlord Tenant Act it is still relatively easy for the rooming house landlord to evict the tenants. It is common to see, at the end of the

month, the belongings of people who have just been evicted on the sidewalks of the Parkdale area. In practical terms, all the landlord has to do is to put the tenants' belongings on the street and get another tenant in the room before the previous tenant comes back. With a vacancy rate of 0.2 in the City of Toronto, rooming houses included, it is easy for the landlord to find another tenant for the room.

In the opinion of Michael Melling, a lawyer with the Parkdale Community Legal Clinic, evictions in rooming house accommodation continue to occur despite the legislation contained in the LTA. Many roomers either don't know their tenancy rights or are not willing to go through an entire month of court battles in order to claim their tenancy rights. Their main preoccupation is to find another room as soon as possible. Moreover, it is very difficult for the roomers to win the court battles since many landlords go to great effort to hire astute lawyers to represent them.

The fragile tenure situation of roomers prevents them from becoming politically more active and consequently place more pressure on the political world. If roomers decide to become more active in the tenants movement, they jeopardize their housing stability. The landlord might feel antagonistic to their actions and might decide to evict them (Michael Melling, Pers. Comm. November, 9 1988).



A widespread education program which informs tenants of their rights is needed in order to make the LTA more efficient. The appeal process must be more expeditious.

### C. Housing Policy Statement

The province of Ontario, through the Ministries of Housing and of Municipal Affairs, announced in August 23, 1988 a Housing Policy Statement . This policy document which encourages municipalities to pursue a course of residential intensification. Specifically, this policy document requires that 25% of new housing be built for low and moderate income groups; and makes a mix of housing types mandatory in all communities. The province of Ontario, under the powers granted through the Ontario Planning Act, can intervene in municipal planning matters regarding affordable housing because it is deemed to be of provincial interest. The municipalities are required to incorporate this policy statement into their official plans.

This document has not been in place long enough to assess its performance, however, it has already been criticized by Metro Toronto politicians. The main criticism of the document has been that it fails to state how the municipalities will be compensated for the infrastructure required to add the required housing units.

The Housing Policy Statement specifically refers to rooming houses in Section 2.4:

Support and increase in the supply of housing through making better use of existing resources, buildings or serviced sites in keeping with this policy, including:

(d) designation of areas to permit rooming, boarding and lodging houses in locations where demand and feasibility of accommodating them can be demonstrated; and,

(e) policies and development standards for new residential developments so alterations to create additional units in new building stock can take place in the future, as needs change within those communities.

and in Section 3:

It is the policy of the province of Ontario that: (e) contain provisions to permit rooming, boarding and lodging houses and accessory apartments as-of-right where they are permitted by the official plan. (6-7).

The provincial government is currently investigating a fourth regulatory tool which affects rooming houses. The provincial government, in consultation with attorneys is investigating avenues to implement power of entry in suspected illegal dwellings. This could be an additional way to improve the quality and public image of the rooming house accommodation (Ann Borroah, Pers. Comm September 9, 1988).

#### **D. The Federal/Provincial Non-Profit Housing Program**

This is a bilateral program between the Federal and the Provincial government to deliver social housing units. A new federal/provincial housing program was established in February of 1986. Under this new agreement and for the next five years, 6,700 social housing units will be delivered annually for the entire province of Ontario. This new agreement stipulates that 10% of the units, or 670 units, be set aside as special needs housing. The special needs category include the homeless, battered spouses, the physically, developmentally and psychiatrically-handicapped adults and low income singles. Under this bilateral program, the federal and provincial governments share the cost of subsidized housing. The federal government pays 60% of the cost of the subsidies; the provincial government pays the remaining 40%.

#### **E. Project 3000**

This project was launched in 1987 as the provincial response to the International Year for Shelter for the Homeless and in recognition in recognition of the growing housing need experienced by the low-income singles population in Ontario. This program was designed to provide financial support to non-profit groups prepared to built housing specifically for low income singles or combination of low income singles and other special needs groups.

Special needs people include the homeless, battered spouses, the physically, developmentally and psychiatrically-handicapped adults and the low income singles. Project 3000 was the first social housing program in the province of Ontario accessible to low income singles. Since January of 1988, low income singles, regardless of their age, can apply for social housing (Fred Beaver, Pers. Comm. November 2, 1988).

Project 3000 has made available 3,000 housing units across Ontario; 1,000 in Metropolitan Toronto and 2,000 in the rest of Ontario. To this date, all housing units have been allocated; approximately 1,800 have been already built (Fred Beaver, Pers. Comm, November 2 1988).

The housing projects created under the Project 3000 and the special needs housing portion of the Federal/Provincial non-profit housing program have incorporated the delivery of social services to its residents under the Supportive Community Living model. While funding for the construction of the housing units themselves comes from either CMHC or from the provincial Ministry of Housing, the funds for the delivery of social services comes from different ministries such as the Ministry of Community and Social Services, Municipal Affairs, Correctional Services, the Secretariat for senior citizens Affairs, and the office responsible for

Disabled Persons (Fred Beaver, Pers. Comm. November 2nd, 1986, Ministry of Housing Conservation Unit).

Self-Help Incorporated<sup>3</sup> Self-Help Incorporated is the housing development agency of the Christian Resource Centre (CRC) of Toronto. It owns and operates 13 rooming houses in the East end of the City of Toronto. Each of these rooming houses accommodates three to five low-income tenants. Ten out of the thirteen rooming houses have been acquired since 1987 with funding from the Project 3000 program. The purchase of these rooming houses was done with a loan from a private lending institution. This loan is guaranteed by the Provincial government who also subsidizes the difference between the amount collected in rent and the total cost of the operation. The rent-geared-to-income program subsidizes the rent of the tenants.

The CRC is a community organization which has been operating for 25 years in the midst of the Regent Park. The CRC operates a drop-in center for the residents of the area, many of whom are roomers, and for the homeless where coffee and sandwiches are served daily. The CRC also operates a

<sup>3</sup> I obtained the information regarding Self-help Incorporated through an interview with Michael Schapcott, a community worker with the Christian Resource Center on November 30, 1989.

food bank. The CRC is an organization very active politically in housing advocacy issues. The Roomers Association and the Basic Poverty Action Group operate from the CRC.

Through their involvement in the community, the organizers at the CRC consider rooming houses to play a very important role in the neighborhood. Rooming houses serve the housing needs of transient population, students, temporary workers, and people who have just arrived to the city. Moreover, there are persons who prefer to live in rooming houses because it is cheaper than having their own place and because they prefer to have some company at home. The presence of rooming houses contributes to enhance the socio-economic mix in an inner city area which is increasingly becoming dominated by high and middle income residents.

In light of the rapid decrease of rooming house units resulting from gentrification pressures in the area, the community organizers at the CRC felt that the best way to preserve the rooming house units was to remove them from the housing market. Thus, the CRC has concentrated its efforts in the purchase and rehabilitation of existing rooming houses. Ownership under a non-profit organization guarantees

the continued availability of these units for low income tenants.

Self-help Incorporated has made plans to expand its rooming housing program. Self-help is currently negotiating the purchase of a 65-unit rooming house in the East End of Toronto. Self-Help is also planning the redevelopment of the property surrounding the CRC. Sixty-five new units of shared accommodation will be created in a number of low-rise town houses. The rooming house program will continue in the future since Self Help has been allocated 100 units per year for the next three years, under the provincial non-profit housing program.

The rooming houses are operated under a self-help cooperative management model which is introduced gradually by a team of four community workers. These community workers help the residents set up weekly meetings where the tenants themselves establish house rules and resolve any difficulties that might arise amongst them. The community workers also help tenants with their individual needs such as medical treatment, and social assistance. The ultimate goal of the tenant self-management program is to have the tenants manage the premises on their own. It is hoped that once the tenant self-management structures are in place, the

tenants will be able to assist each other in their personal needs also.

90 Shuter Street<sup>4</sup>. 90 Shuter Street is the name and the location of a non-profit housing project of the City of Toronto. This project has been built and is currently managed by the Homes First Housing society in 1984. This housing project consists of an 11-story apartment building containing 17 units of shared accommodation with 4 or 5 rooms per unit. Each separate unit operates like a rooming house in that each resident has his or her own room but the kitchen, dining room, and bathrooms are shared. Rent is geared-to-income in all the units.

This project houses a total of 77 low-income men and women from diverse age groups. The residents of this project are single people who previously lived in hostels, the streets, and rooming houses. All of them made frequent use of the facilities of the Fred Victor Mission located at Queen and Sherbourne in Toronto.

<sup>4</sup> The information regarding the 90 Shuter street project has been obtained through two interviews with Bill Bosworth, a community organizer working in the housing project. The interviews were held on August 10, 1988 and on November 15, 1988



The Homes First Housing Society was formed by community workers of the Fred Victor Mission. These workers viewed the construction of permanent and affordable housing for the homeless population as a necessary prerequisite to achieve emotional and economic stability. Their experience had indicated that people do not become homeless because of personal inadequacies. Rather, personal problems arise as a result of being homeless for extended periods of time.

The 90 Shuter Street project has been constructed with funding from various sources: CMHC covered the capital costs; provincial funding provides the rent subsidy; and the provincial government and the Metropolitan government jointly fund the facilitative management and the supportive community living component of the project.

Keith Whitney Homes Society<sup>5</sup>. This housing society was also formed by staff working at the Fred Victor Mission. Keith Whitney Homes Society was incorporated in March of 1988 with the mandate to redevelop the site where the Fred Victor Mission is located at 147 Queen Street East. The board of directors of the Fred Victor Mission was compelled to transform the facilities of the emergency shelter into

<sup>5</sup> the information regarding the housing projects sponsored by the Keith Whitney housing has been obtained in an interview with Jim Murphy, a community worker on November 11, 1988.

permanent accommodation in light of the persistent housing and unemployment problem, especially, among the young single population of Toronto. At the time of writing this thesis, the property was being redeveloped. Funding for the construction of this project has been obtained from the Project 3000 program.

The proposed housing project, will house 194 people which is the same number of people that could be accommodated in the Fred Victor Mission in a given night. The project will consist of two buildings: one building with capacity for 64 people and the other with capacity for 130 people. These buildings will consist of several units with 5 to 6 rooms each. Essentially, each unit will be like a rooming house where each individual will have his or her own room. The living room, dining room, kitchen, and bathrooms will be shared. This project incorporates some innovative design features which, in the future, might allow the residents to have greater privacy in the midst of the shared accommodation. For example, two of the bedrooms in one unit can be closed to form a one bedroom area with another sitting area adjacent to it.

The decision of the board of directors of the Fred Victor Mission has been severely criticised by John Jagt, the General Manager for the operation of shelters for

Metropolitan Toronto. Mr. Jagt believes that transforming emergency shelters into permanent housing is not an efficient way to solve the housing problem of Toronto. In his opinion, emergency shelters are always needed because they provide accommodation for those suffering temporary housing problems (battered wives, newcomers Toronto, those who are temporary unemployed, etc.) (John Jagt, Pers. Comm September 21, 1988). Mr Jagt fails to realize that while there will always be groups in the population in need of temporary shelter, many people using the shelters today do not have a temporary housing problem but a permanent one; they cannot find affordable housing in Toronto.

Other critics of the initiative of the Fred Victor Mission have stated that it would have been possible to build more housing units for the low income population if the site where the Mission is had been sold and the revenues had been used to build social housing units outside the city boundaries where the land is cheaper. The land might be cheaper outside the city limits but it is very difficult to find a suitable site to build social housing. One wonders of what use is to have the cash to build a greater number of units but no site where to built them. Moreover, the organizers of Homes First and the Keith Whitney housing societies felt that it was important that the units be built

in the same neighborhood where many of their tenants have lived for many years.

The Homes First and the Keith Whitney housing societies have adopted the Supportive Community Living model and the Facilitative style of management to their housing projects.

Supportive Community Living (SCL) is the combination of housing and support services which enable people with special needs to live in the community. The SCL program was developed in recognition that the social housing projects were increasingly being occupied by tenants with special needs. The special needs residents include those with physical, developmental, and psychiatric handicaps; battered women; socially disadvantaged persons; offenders and ex-offenders; people with alcohol or drug abuse problems; youth; and elderly people who are frail. These tenants were in need of housing as well as of support services (Working Committee on Supportive Community Living 1987 10).

The services delivered under the SCL model range from a wide spectrum of categories according to the needs of the user. The ultimate goals of SCL are independence, integration, and stability. Independence implies that the person is able to make as many decisions as possible about his or her housing and support service needs. Assessment of the needs should be made on an individual basis, rather than

as part of a group. Individuals should be able to arrange for their housing separately from their support services (The Working Committee on Supportive Community Living 1987, 14).

SCL should be implemented to allow the maximum degree of integration into the community. This objective can be achieved primarily by mixing people who require support with those who don't in the same housing project or by dispersing those in the special needs category in the different parts of the community. Finally, the goal of stability itself is achieved when there is permanent housing. Permanent housing provides a stable base from which people with special needs can begin to cope with the challenges of daily living. Stability does not suggest that people will always live in the same residence. Instead, it implies that the housing situation is relatively long-term and that the decision to move is made by the individual, rather than the provider of the service or of the housing.

Funding for the construction of the housing component of the special needs housing comes from either the federal/provincial non-profit housing program or from the unilateral non-profit housing program funded by the province of Ontario. The support service ministries must provide funds from within their existing budgets to service the

housing units with special needs residents. In the 90 Shuter Street project, for example, each of the 17 "rooming houses" is tied to a local agency which is responsible for the delivery of the social services needed by the residents of the unit.

The special needs housing is developed and delivered by non-profit organizations. The development of special needs housing is considerably more complex than the development of regular non-profit housing. Groups wishing to develop supportive housing must seek and obtain funding approval from at least one of the support service ministries as well as from the Ministry of Housing. Special needs housing proposals must meet the selection criteria of all ministries involved (Working Committee on Supportive Community Living 1987,73).

The SCL strategy represents a change from the traditional group home model. The group home model determined that the housing situation of the individual was conditional to receiving the social assistance. Once this assistance was no longer needed, the individual had to leave the group home. The basic component of the SCL strategy is that housing and the social services are independent from each other.

The facilitative style of management starts with the design of the housing project itself. The tenants were initially involved with the design of the units, with the process of acquiring the necessary funding and finding an adequate site. In these initial stages, the Homes First Housing Society consisted acted as a facilitator between the future residents of the project and the authorities and organisms providing the funding for the project.

A style of facilitative management is also adopted in the day-to-day operations of the premises. The tenants have the option to participate in the management committees and can decide everything from cleaning and repair schedules to rules/regulations regarding who moves in and who gets evicted. The hired staff working in the project intervenes to facilitate the relationships between the tenants and the different institutions and organizations they need to contact when certain problem arises. These organizations could either be CMHC or any of the social service agencies involved in the delivery of social services to the tenants.

Through their work in housing issues, the organizers of the Homes First Housing Society and of the Keith Whitney Housing Society hope to address broader issues in society. They view their housing projects as one step towards the re-creation of the large low-income singles community which

used to live in the City of Toronto in rooming houses. This community has practically disappeared from the inner city with the extinction of the existing rooming houses. These new projects contribute to the availability of affordable housing units for low income singles of the inner city. Affordable housing is the necessary base for the political mobilization of the low income single population in our society (Bill Bosworth, Pers. Comm. November 15, 1989).

The Low-Rise Rental Rehabilitation Program. The Low Rise Rental Rehabilitation Program (LRRP) was announced in 1985 as a four year mandate to rehabilitate as many as 17,000 older low-rise rental units across the province of Ontario. Following on a recommendation by the Ontario Task Force on Roomers, Boarders and Lodgers, the LRRP has now been extended to include rooming houses and hostel type accommodation. The rooming house component of the program (LRRP-R) has a mandate to rehabilitate 2,000 rooming house units by 1990. The objective of the LRRP-R is to conserve the existing supply of rooming houses by improving their physical condition while maintaining their market suitability for low to moderate income tenants.

A forgivable loan of up to \$5,000 per bed unit is available to landlords of eligible rooming houses. Bed units within rooming houses are defined in terms of minimum



floor area standards. In order to be eligible for this program, the property must conform to the local zoning by-laws, licensing by-laws, and with all relevant health and safety codes. The loans can also be obtained by landlords wishing to bring their properties up to health and safety standards (Ministry of Housing, Housing Conservation Unit, April 1988).

#### **F. Conclusion**

Non-profit groups engaged in the provision of social housing have used the provincial housing fund to rehabilitate existing rooming house units. Shared accommodation in the form of rooming houses has permitted these groups to accommodate a larger number of low income singles than they would have in self-contained units, given the zoning restrictions where the property is located. Community organizers feel that shared accommodation is a model conducive to the successful implementation of the facilitative management strategy. The provincial low-rise rehabilitation program has now been extended to privately owned rooming houses.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### SINGLE ROOM OCCUPANCY HOUSING IN VANCOUVER

#### 4.1 Historical Background

The origins of SRO housing are closely related to the economic activities of Vancouver during the end of the 1800's and beginning of the 1900's. Single males employed in the logging, and fishing industries and in the construction of the CRP railroad were housed in several types of SRO's: rooming houses and hotels, cabins, shacks, and fangkou. SRO housing was not a housing form exclusive for single males; families with children were also housed in rooming houses, especially during the first five decades of the 1900's because there was a shortage of affordable housing in the city. SRO housing was located in the West and East End of the City, gradually most of the rooming houses of the West End have disappeared and the bulk of SRO accommodation today remains in the Downtown Eastside.

British Columbia's early economy at the time relied on ready sources of cheap labor to exploit the natural resources of the province. Vancouver started as a service and lumber mill community on Burrard Inlet. Vancouver's economic base consisted of construction, lumber manufacturing, canning and fishing. These resource

industries were active in the spring, summer, and early fall but were closed during the winter. As a result, there was a great deal of winter unemployment in the city, as was the case in other Canadian cities. However, Vancouver's status as a regional employment centre intensified these seasonal employment cycles. The terminal city, as Vancouver was then known, became the "centralization point for all men seeking work" on the transcontinental railway, as well as the place from which workers headed to coastal fish canneries and logging camps (McDonald 1986, 36).

The seasonal pattern of resource industry employment generated in Vancouver a flow of single, mobile workers who, when they were in the city during the off-employment season, lived in a relatively self-contained world defined by SROs, waterfront area rooming houses and saloons (McDonald 1986, 40). Vancouver, at the turn of the century was predominantly a society of males. In 1901 men formed almost 60% of the population (Roy 1980, 29).

The years between the turn of the century and the First World War saw the population of Vancouver and its environs quadrupling. The city expanded West and South. The CPR was a key element in favouring the development of the West End of Vancouver and Shaughnessy. The CPR built its head office in the West End and in 1887 the CPR opened the Vancouver

Hotel at the corner of Georgia and Granville; many of CPR officials followed suit by building their residences in the West End.

The keen effort of the CPR to develop Grandville street was followed by other financial institutions and commercial enterprises. The Bank of Montreal opened its headquarters on Granville street and the Hudson's Bay Company established the Granville street branch in 1889 (Roy 1980 30). This development of the West End initiated by the CPR was the main contributing factor for the shift in importance from the Hastings and Main area in the East towards the West End.

The East End still remained a very vibrant community; it was the main reception area for immigrants and transient workers. The large homes that the well-to-do left when they moved to the West End were transformed into rooming and boarding houses for the immigrants, the poor, and the transient. The East End, because of its proximity to the Hastings Saw Mill and the wharves, was the residential location of the working classes.

There were different types of building forms containing single room accommodation. Whether the rooms were located in cabins, lodging houses, shacks or "fangkou" they shared common characteristics: poor ventilation, overcrowding, lack of natural light, heat, and hot water, insufficient sanitary

facilities, fifth, and flooded basements. These conditions were documented extensively in contemporary health reports.

Lodging houses were predominant in the West End and the business district of the 1920's. The manager was usually a woman who either rented or owned the dwelling; she let rooms and housekeeping suites to single men or women, couples and families. The manager supplied the tenant with cooking facilities and fuel. Rooming houses were typically located in buildings which were a Yaletown version of pattern-book Gothic Revival domestic architecture, consisted of perhaps 6, 12, or even 22 rooms (Wade 1988, 28).

There were also rooming houses and cheap hotels in the business district and the East End. The hotels were usually operated by companies; women or Asian male managers tended to operate the rooms. These hotels and rooming houses varied in size. Premises like the Powell Rooms or Grand Union Rooms might have had 20 or 35 rooms, other were enormous. The Glencoe Lodge at 1001 West Georgia offered 79 rooms, for example. Some of these buildings had a dumb-bell design with a deep, narrow light-well that provided the only source of daylight and ventilation for bedrooms and toilets. In the East End, rooming houses occupied the entire typical 25 feet long and narrow lot which was predominant in much of the East End.

Cabins appeared by 1900 mostly in the East End. These were two- or three-storey frame buildings containing single rooms opening off a porch that ran along one side of the structure from street to lane. Cabins were located adjacent to industrial plants and warehouses which cut off natural light. Public health officials declared them to be "a menace to public health" because of their deficiencies in ventilation and lighting. Families with children and single men were housed in these premises (Wade 1988, 31).

Shacks were remnants of the pre-incorporation years and although the city demolished them on several occasions they sprang up repeatedly. In 1886, following the completion of the C.P.R., the unemployed Chinese labourers threw up huts on the marshes between what is now Pender Street and False Creek. By 1894 there were at least 380 shacks in the Burrard Inlet and False Creek shorelines (Wade 36). Shacks represented a form of squatting resulting from the high unemployment, high land values, rising rents, and the inability of the city to build replacement housing for the Chinese labourers.

Single male chinese labourers who worked in canneries and in the construction of the railroad lived in boarding houses or fangkou operated by Chinese associations or

businessmen. Fangkou were located in cellars, mezzanines, and upper floors of commercial or society buildings and in leased homes. Groups of men from the same family, village, or district in China shared a fangkou . The fangkou were very small in size; the men divided the floor of the fangkou into small cubicles or rooms where they slept on cotton quilts and Chinese mats placed in low bunks. An example of a two-storey fangkou is the Sam Kee Building located at Pender and Carrall. Overcrowding was the greatest problem that the Chinese men faced in these premises.

Single East Indians and Italians lived communally in houses rented by one man for many. Women in Italian and other European families supplemented the family income by providing room and board services for labouring bachelors.

During the war and post-war eras there was an acute crisis of affordable housing in Vancouver. In 1942 the vacancy rate for all types of accommodation was .3 percent; in mid 1945, the vacancy rate lowered to .004 percent (Wade 1986, 294). Single room occupancy housing in rooming houses provided valuable accommodation for families with children who could not find affordable accommodation in apartments and houses in the city.

A study by the Vancouver Housing association describing the housing conditions of the area comprised by Burrard Street, Beatty Street, and South of Dunsmuir to False Creek around the 1940's stated the following:

No less than 59% of the houses surveyed in this area were found to be in multiple occupancy, and over 40% of the "rooming" population was living at a density of two or more persons per room... Numerous individual cases of gross crowding were reported and instances of families with one or two children living in a single room were comparatively frequent. The majority of the rooms are rented as housekeeping units, but few of them have adequate facilities for washing, cooking or food storage. Under 10% of the rented rooms had sinks or washbasins and only 5% of the houses in multiple occupancy had more than one bath. Cases of 20, 40 or even 50 persons sharing one bathroom were found. East of Grandville Street over half the houses were heated by stoves only and a large proportion of the rooms in these houses were inadequately heated. Many houses are infested with bedbugs, one of the worst scourges of poor housing (Vancouver Housing Association 1954, 1).

Thus, the home of thousands of families in Vancouver consisted of a single room which served for cooking, eating, and sleeping. The bathroom was possibly shared with other dozen families.

During the 1940's the physical condition of many of the residential hotels located and downtown in the East End began to deteriorate. After the economic depression of the 30's, many unemployed single men found accommodation and support services, such as hostels, charitable organizations, in the Downtown Eastside. Men returning from the war during



the 40's joined the ranks of the predominantly single male population in the area. In later years, other men retired from employment in the shipyards and mills also found accommodation in the residential hotels of the Downtown Eastside. Men with fixed income such as the elderly, disabled workers hurt in industrial accidents or suffering from industrial diseases joined the ranks of those living in SRO housing. Today, many of the veterans of the depression era struggles are still residents of the rooming houses and residential hotels of the Downtown Eastside. Gradually, poverty has increased among the residents of SRO establishments as the population of the SRO hotels has become more dependent on welfare and disability pensions. The physical condition and numbers of SRO stock has continued to deteriorate into the 1950's and 1960's.

The stock of rooming houses and residential hotels in the West and East End have become the primary target of gentrification which started in early 70's. Rooming houses and residential hotels have been deconverted to apartment buildings, condominiums, single family dwellings, commercial uses and parking. It has been documented that areas such as the West End, Fairview/Mount Pleasant, the Grandville corridor, and Gastown have experienced a reduction of 50% and 95% of their SRO stock (Friesen 1988, 5-21).

Vancouver's SRO housing originated to house the transient male population who came to Vancouver during the winter season from the logging camps, mills and canneries. In addition to hotels and rooming houses, single rooms were also found in cabins, shacks, and fangkou (Chinese boarding homes). SROs in rooming houses played an important role in housing families during the first decades of the 1900's when there was an accute shortage of affordable housing.

#### **4.2 The SRO housing stock of Vancouver**

##### **A. Definition of SROs**

Single room occupancy units in Vancouver can be found in residential hotels and in rooming houses. The Social Planning Department often uses the term lodging houses to refer to both, rooming houses and residential hotels. The main difference between rooming houses and residential hotels is that the hotels have a liquor license to operate pub usually located in the main floor of the establishment and rooming houses do not have a liquor license.

##### **B. Number and Trends**

The approximate number of SRO units located in residential hotels and rooming houses for the City of Vancouver can be obtained from three different data sources: census data, business license data file from the City of Vancouver, and the City of Vancouver's Social Planning

Department surveys of the Downtown Eastside. There are problems associated with each of these data sources.

Traditionally, Statistics Canada has defined SROs as a "collective dwelling":

A collective dwelling refers to a dwelling of a commercial, institutional or communal nature. It may be identified by a sign on the premises or by a Census Representative speaking with the person in charge or with a resident or a neighbour, etc. Included are hotels, motels, tourist homes, nursing homes, hospitals, staff residences, communal quarters of military camps, work camps, jails, missions, rooming- or lodging-houses, and so on. Collective dwellings may be occupied by usual residents or solely by foreign and/or temporary residents (Statistics Canada 1986, 105).

The 1986 census, however, included all SRO units of the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver in the Private Dwelling category, specifically, in the Apartment category:

A private dwelling refers to a separate set of living quarters with a private entrance either from outside or from a common hall, lobby, vestibule or stairway inside the building. The entrance to the dwelling must be one which can be used without passing through the living quarters or someone else (Statistics Canada 1986, 105).

The decision to include SROs in the apartment category was a conscious decision on the part of Statistics Canada and it was done only for the SROs of the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. The inclusion of SROs in the apartment category would allow the collection of data regarding the socio-economic characteristics of the households living in

SROs. However, this change has made it difficult to compare the 1986 data with that of other census years. Statistics Canada should have kept a record of how many collective dwellings were included in the private dwelling category.

The Business Data File of the City of Vancouver provides information regarding the numbers of licensed hotels and rooming houses. This data file does not differentiate residential hotels from tourist hotels, thus, it is not possible to obtain a good estimate of SRO units for the City of Vancouver. Paul Raynor from the City of Vancouver Planning Department estimates that there could be, approximately, 11,000 lodging house units in the entire City of Vancouver (Paul Raynor, Pers. Comm. April 12, 1989).

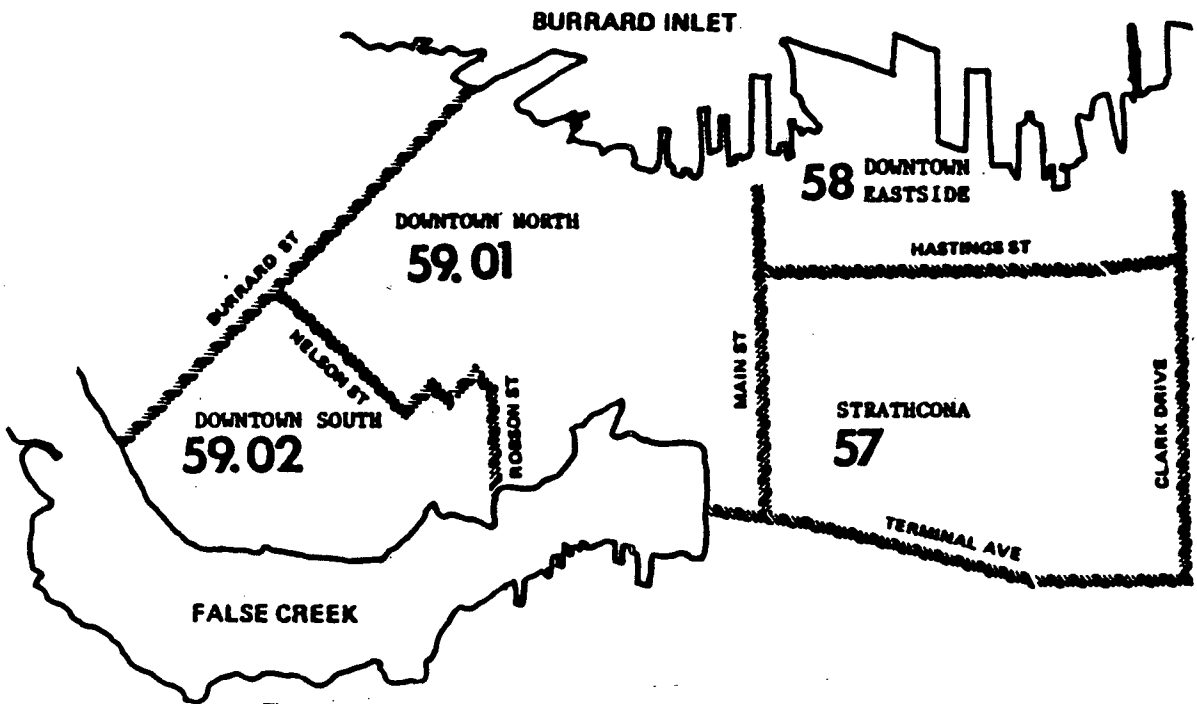
The third data source consists of the Social Planning Department surveys of the SRO stock of the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. There are two definitions regarding the Downtown Eastside. The first is a narrow definition of the area and is used for the purposes of the Zoning and Development By-law. According to this By-law, the Downtown Eastside is the area bounded by Main Street to the West, Heatley Street to the East, the lane South of Hastings Street to the South and Alexander Street to the North. This area is also called the Downtown Eastside-Oppenheimer district by the City.

For the purposes of this thesis, a broader definition is preferred. According to this second definition, the boundaries of the Downtown Eastside are the following: Howe St. to the West; Clark Drive to the East, Burrard Inlet to the North, and False Creek-Terminal Avenue to the South (Figure 2). This definition of the Downtown Eastside is the one used in the surveys of the City of Vancouver Social Planning Department.

The Downtown Eastside contains the major concentration of SRO units in Vancouver; fewer additional SRO units, mostly in rooming houses might be scattered in other parts of the city (Friesen, 1988; Appendix II). For the purpose of this thesis, I will use the results of the Social Planning Department surveys of the Downtown Eastside. These surveys have been taken periodically and it is possible to readily identify the changes in the SRO stock overtime.

FIGURE 2.

## Map of the Downtown Eastside



The number of SRO units in the Downtown Eastside has been steadily decreasing since the first survey of the area was taken in 1978 (Table 4).

TABLE 4  
NUMBER OF LODGING HOUSES AND LODGING HOUSE UNITS

	Lodging Houses	Units
1978	278	11,321
1984	228	10,153
1986	197	8,617

Source: Social Planning Department, City of Vancouver, 1986

In November of 1978 there was a total of 278 lodging houses containing 11,321 units in the Downtown Eastside. In December 1984, there were 228 lodging houses with 10,153 units. This represents a loss of 1,168 units. The rate of SRO loss between during this period was 1.7% per year<sup>6</sup>.

The Social Planning Department reports that most of decrease of SRO units between 1982 and 1984 occurred in the Gastown area, where a total of 269 units were demolished or converted to tourist accommodation. It was also found that SRO establishments were being converted to residential buildings (Social Planning Department 1985, 33-34).

The loss of SRO accommodation in all areas of Downtown Eastside has continued during the 1984-1986 period for all the areas of the Downtown Eastside (Table 5). During this period, there was a total estimated loss of 600 units. The 1985 survey initially indicated a loss of 1,639 units for

<sup>6</sup> There is some discrepancy between the 1983 and 1985 Social Planning Department surveys with respect to the total loss of lodging house units. The 1983 survey indicates that between November of 1978 and December of 1982 "there appears to have been a total loss of 76 lodging houses containing 1,987 units or roughly 20 buildings containing 500 units a year" (p.7). The 1985 survey indicates that "over the last 6 years" a loss of 858 lodging house units has occurred (p.8)".



the two year period. Of the initial 1,639 units lost, it has been estimated that approximately 1,000 units were temporarily lost because they were converted to tourist accommodation during EXPO 86; approximately 600 units were totally lost (Social Planning Department 1987, 4). Between 1984 and 1986 the rate of loss of SRO units was 3% per year.

TABLE 5  
NUMBER OF LODGING HOUSE UNITS

	1984	1986	
	Sleeping/ housekeeping units		Change
Downtown South	1,410	1,009	-401
Downtown North	4,945	4,369	-576
Downtown Eastside	2,148	1,793	-355
Strathcona	1,753	1,446	-307

Source: Social Planning Department, City of Vancouver, 1986

The impact of Expo 86 in the Downtown Eastside has not only been felt in the form of number of SRO units lost but Expo 86 has also left an element of uncertainty in the neighborhood. All of the hotels which underwent major renovations expecting to have high levels of occupation during Expo 86 have not been able to pay for their

renovation expenses and have now gone into receivership. Some of these hotels are now for sale; others are still being operated as residential hotels. Without the proper legislation in place, these hotels could be purchased and then converted to other residential or commercial uses.

SRO units have also been disappearing from other neighborhoods of Vancouver. Friesen (1988) has documented the loss of SRO units from neighborhoods like the West End, the Grandville corridor, Fairview, and Mount Pleasant. These neighborhoods have experienced a 86% reduction of their stock of rooming houses and residential hotels during the period from 1971 to 1986. Rooming houses and hotels in these areas have been converted to buildings containing self-contained units, replaced by commercial, office and retail land uses (Appendix III).

### **C. The physical condition of the SRO stock**

The following are the main characteristics of SRO accommodation in Vancouver:

- \* the average size of a SRO unit is 100 square feet; the average rent is \$225.91 a month which constitutes 51% of the income of an average SRO resident.

- \* practically all SRO units are furnished; they contain a bed, table and chair.

- \* only 50% of the units have cooking facilities in the units. It is illegal to have cooking facilities in the hotel rooms, however, some hotels allow hot plates to be brought by the residents.

\* approximately half of the SRO units have a fridge in their unit. Approximately 30% of the households without their own fridge, have access to a common fridge.

\* 80% of the units do not have toilet facilities. Communal shower or baths exist in only 21% of the market units.

\* SRO establishments do not have their own laundry facilities, however, laundry facilities are located within easy walking distance for 90% of SRO residents.

\* approximately 75% of the SRO residents receive linen and towel supplies as part of their rents.

\* only 15% of the SRO establishments have entrance at grade; 7% are buildings with ramps to facilitate accessibility to the building ( DERA, 1988).

There is no objective way to rate the SRO buildings with respect to their physical condition and degree of deterioration. Community workers surveying the units found that many of the SRO units are in a major state of disrepair. Only approximately 10% to 20% of the SRO stock is in "good/acceptable" condition (the rating of "good/acceptable" was just a subjective rating by the worker visiting the units). Many units have overloaded electrical outlets, dirty or non-functioning shared toilet facilities, ineffective entrance security and it is common to find the presence of cockroaches and mice. Other disruptive things that the SRO tenants have to put up with are that the units are either too hot or too cold, there is noise from the traffic, and the "junkies" sleep in the toilets at night ( Dera 1988; David Westell, Pers. Comm. December 8, 1987).

Many of the residential units have been kept in poor condition, with complaints that investment is used to renovate pubs downstairs without upkeep of housing units above. Some SRO units have been renovated in recent years as a result of the enforcement of building codes. The City enforces laws sparingly knowing the possible harmful displacement effects.

#### 4.3 The Residents of Vancouver's SROs

##### A. Household Composition and Gender

Ninety percent of the SRO households are formed by single persons; approximately 8 percent are formed by either a couple or two persons sharing the unit; and 2% of the households are formed by families, generally a couple with one child (Social Planning Department 1985 21). Eighty-seven percent of the single people are male and 13% are female (Dera, 1988 15).

The single male household has been the most predominant household type in SRO accommodation and of course in the Downtown Eastside. The number of single female households has increased slightly since the 1982 survey.

### **B. Age**

The average age for the residents of SRO units is 51 years (Dera 1988 15). Traditionally, the age category with the greatest number of residents has been the 35 to 54 and the 55 to 69 years old categories (Social Planning Department 1983, 19 and 1985, 22).

### **C. Ethnicity**

Seventy eight percent of the SRO residents are Caucasian; 12 percent are Native Indian; and 9 percent are Oriental (generally, Chinese-Canadians). Approximately 40% of the SRO residents use a non-English language in their daily lives. Of those 37% speak Cantonese, 10% speak a Canadian Native Indian Language, 12% a Western European language and 9% an Eastern European language (Dera 1988, 19).

### **D. Length of Residency**

The average length of residency of a resident in an SRO unit is four years. The average length of residence in the Downtown Eastside is 10 years. The 1983 survey revealed the presence of a large number of residents living in SRO units for less than one year. This group decreased in number in the following survey, but it still remained very important (Social planning Department 1983, 20; 1985, 23).

These results indicate first that SRO tenants are not transient, in the sense that they wander from place to place. In the case of Vancouver, they remain in the Downtown Eastside for long periods of time. Even if they move, they stay within the SRO accommodation. SROs provide accommodation for two important groups of people. SROs provide long term accommodation for those who are unemployed, either because of old age or physical disability. SROs also provide short term accommodation for those who have just arrived to Vancouver while they find a permanent job or another place to live.

#### **E. Employment**

Five percent of the SRO population is currently employed in a full time occupation; 2% is employed in part-time occupations. The majority of the employed residents work in the service industries. Ninety-three percent of the residents of SROs are unemployed. The average number of years that they have been unemployed is 7 (Dera 1988, 17). Unemployment is not voluntary among the SRO residents. Many are just too old to work and many others have physical disabilities which prevent them from engaging in permanent employment. Forty seven percent of all SRO residents have some form of physical disability (Dera 1988, 17).

## F. Income

The average income for a SRO resident is \$500 a month or \$5,268 a year. The income of SRO residents is closely related to their old age, disability pensions, and welfare payments. The level of these income assistance programs is far below the poverty line set by Statistics Canada for a single person living in a major urban centre.

The Old Age pension combined with the pension supplement and the the shelter allowance for seniors represents a monthly income of \$670 or a yearly income of \$8,040. The maximum welfare rate for an unemployable single person is \$480 a month or \$5,760 a year. The disability pension for handicapped people (HPIA) is \$620 a month or \$7,440 a year. Of all these three types of recipients of social assistance, those receiving the Old Age Pension are the ones with the highest income. All of these social assistance programs provide an income which is far below the poverty line for a single person living in Vancouver of \$11,079. Poverty among unattached individuals who are renters living in SRO units of the Downtown Eastside is a reflection of what is happening to similar household types across Canada. In Canada, 38% of all unattached male individuals are poor; 61% of unattached females are poor (Canada, National Council of Welfare 1988, Poverty Profile 1988, Ottawa).

### G. Affordability of the SRO stock

The average rent for a SRO units is \$236.80 per month for accommodations that are generally substandard. Basically, the rents of the SRO stock are tied to the shelter component of the income assistance programs received by the majority of the residents of the Downtown Eastside. Rents always increase when the shelter allowances increase. If the unit costs less than the shelter allowances, the residents do not get full rental stipend. Those residents receiving GAIN and those receiving the HPIA pension receive a shelter allowance of \$250 per month. If a place charges less than \$250, \$230 for example, the Ministry of Social Services and Housing deducts \$20 from the welfare cheque. If the rent is higher than the maximum \$250, then the resident must use the money from the food budget to pay for the rent.

SRO housing is relatively more affordable for seniors, less for the handicapped and for single persons receiving GAIN. All the sleeping/housekeeping rooms in SROs are affordable for seniors receiving both the GIS and SAFER supplements. About half of all units fall at or below the GAIN and HPIA income levels (Dera 1988, 48).



SRO residents are the poorest tenants in Vancouver and they pay the greatest percentages of their incomes on housing. Two thirds of all residential tenants in the City of Vancouver pay less than 25% of their income on rent; half of the residents of SROs pay more than 40% of their income for rent; the average rent payments are 50% of their income (Social Planning Department 1985, 8).

Housing affordability for the residents of SROs is beyond their control and it is dependent on the relationship between shelter allowances and rents set by the landlord. The landlords on their part are also constrained by the rent levels set by the shelter allowances of the government assistance levels.

#### **H. Residential Tenancy Rights**

At the present time, the residents of SRO units in Vancouver lack residential tenancy rights. This might change in the near future. Currently, the provincial legislation regards the residents of SRO hotels and rooming houses as "licensees". As "licensees", they are considered to be hotel guests even though they might have lived in the hotel room for up to 20 years. Being a "licensee" implies that the SRO resident does not have security of tenure and therefore can be evicted at any time without previous notice; rents can also be increased without previous notice.

Moreover, the use of the room may be regulated by the landlord, i.e. guests might not be allowed in the rooms after certain hour and there might be a charge for having visitors in the room.

In December of 1988, Consumer Services Minister Lyall Hanson announced amendments to the Residential Tenancy Act which will give tenants of residential hotels and rooming houses the same tenancy rights as other residential tenants. These changes are not forthcoming until the opening of the spring session of the legislature, at least. The major objective of this new legislation, according to Lyall Hanson, would be to relieve tenants of the onerous task of pursuing unreturned security deposits through the courts. Unreturned damage or "security" deposits are seen as a major form of abuse of the SRO tenants by their landlords.

The Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA) and the Tenants Rights Action Centre (TRAC) claim that big rental corporations have purchased buildings with money amassed from unreturned security deposits, or by making illegitimate deductions from the deposit. It could take several months before the legislature approves the changes, however there is a positive feeling among the community workers in the Downtown Eastside.

## **I. The Urban Setting of SRO accommodation in Vancouver: the Downtown Eastside**

A description of the SRO establishments and of its residents in the City of Vancouver is incomplete without a description of the neighborhood where these SRO units are concentrated: the Downtown Eastside. The Downtown Eastside provides a bundle of essential services and amenities which form a supportive environment for the residents of residential hotels and rooming houses.

The neighborhood offers close proximity to shopping, parks, health, recreational, and welfare services. Proximity to these services, within walking distance, is very important to a large number of SRO residents since many of them are physically disabled. The neighborhood is the primary focus for socializing activities. Parks and streets, during the summer, and pubs throughout the year are important catalysts for socializing. Socializing outdoors takes place because the SRO units are very small and because there are restrictions on the visitors allowed to the rooms. Meeting in pubs has been a tradition among the Downtown Eastside residents. Many of these single men have worked for many years in the shipbuilding, fishing, and logging activities. The men working in these activities often gather in pubs after their work shifts or when returning

from sea; these habits have been maintained by the residents of the Downtown Eastside after leaving their occupations.

There is a network of 40 different social services agencies operating in the area. These agencies provide the residents with counselling, free food and clothing, and many act as drop-in centers which provide alternative living and recreational space to the residents which might feel too constrained in their small rooms. These services help the residents to make ends meet since many of them pay as much as 50% of their income in housing.

The Carnegie Center is a focal point for the development of the social, cultural, and political activities of the neighborhood. The Carnegie Center is located at Hastings and Main; it is the social and geographic center of the community. It has a library, a chess area, an art gallery, classrooms and meeting rooms. The Center also has a gym, a weight room, a pool has and a senior's lounge. In the Carnegie theatre, the Downtown Eastside Residents Association conducts its monthly membership meetings. Political debates, public information meetings, dances, and bingo games also take place in the center.

Above all, the residents of the area find a sense of community in the Downtown Eastside. Many of these people share a life of struggle (in terms of work, personal life and community problems), links to community-based services, and social networks, all of these have created for many a strong sense of community.

Olds (1988) applies Ahlbrandt's definition of community to the Downtown Eastside. He defines the Downtown Eastside as a "locality of place that serves certain functions and there is the extra-local community into which people's (social) networks also extend" (91). Furthermore, testimony of community workers in the area, medical officers and of members of the police force confirm that the downtown eastside is a community where the residents are not individuals who like to live in isolation but who like to interact with the other local residents.

Community groups such as the Downtown Eastside Residents Association (DERA), the First United Church and the Chinese Benevolent Association have played an important role in the improvement of the quality of life of the SRO and Downtown Eastside residents in general. The Social Planning Department of the City of Vancouver has supported their efforts. These community-based organizations have lobbied for the conversion of the vacant and deteriorating

Carnegie Public Library building into a community center, the upgrading of the Oppenheimer Park, along with the Create A Real Available Beach Committee, the creation of CRAB park, the lobby for the inclusion of residential hotels and rooming house residents under the Residential Tenancy Act, and the on-going battle of lobbying for the development of rental conversion controls which would force a developer to replace any low income rental units demolished by his or her project.

These organizations have the support of the residents of the Downtown Eastside. Dera, for example, has over 4,000 members and their monthly meetings are always very well attended. The membership of DERA is restricted to residents of the Downtown Eastside. Currently, DERA is monitoring closely the developments associated with the Expo lands and the Coal Harbor projects and actively lobbying for the introduction of measures such as the construction of additional social housing units and rental conversion laws, which will mitigate the negative impacts of these development projects on the housing stock and residents of the Downtown Eastside. DERA has been jointly cooperating with the City and the Province for quite some time now in a proposal to purchase some of the SRO hotels and convert them into non-profit social housing. The ground floor licensed premises of the hotel could be operated as a "profit center"

to be used to subsidize the room rates and operating costs of the hotel.

The construction of social housing units in the Downtown Eastside has also been a major accomplishment of these community-based organizations. There now a total of 3,226 social housing units (Social Planning Department 1987 6). Social housing units in the Downtown Eastside constitute a mix of self-contained apartments for families and couples and quasi-SRO units which are larger and better equipped than the traditional market SRO. Social housing is funded by the federal, provincial, and municipal governments. The individual projects ,however, are sponsored, developed, and managed by community-based organizations such as the Dera Housing Society, the First United Church Social Housing Society, and the Chinese Benevolent Association. Social housing projects are welcome in the area because they provide affordable, secure and good quality accommodation and they have a major stabilizing influence in the area by increasing the social mix of the area.

Dera (1988, 12) summarizes the characteristics of the average resident of the Downtown Eastside and of its accommodation in the following way:

The average resident of the Downtown Eastside is a Caucasian male who lives alone. He was born in

Canada but not in British Columbia. He is 51 years old and is a welfare/gain recipient, and has a monthly income of less than \$439.00. His income comprises only 47.5% of the poverty line. He has not worked for 7 years. When he worked he was employed in construction, mining, logging or service industries. He has 47% chance of being physically disabled.

His home is a sleeping or housekeeping room in a hotel with 52 units. He has 50% probability of having cooking facilities in his unit.... If he does not cook, he eats in local restaurants or the Club Alex--a subsidised city-run cafeteria in the Downtown Eastside. ....There is no toilet, nor is there a shower or bath in the unit..... His rent is fifty percent of his income... He has lived in the unit for 4 years and has lived in the Downtown Eastside for over 10 years... His unit is within easy walking distance of shopping, parks, schools, health services and recreational centres (1988, 12-13)

#### **4.4 Actions of the City of Vancouver towards the SRO stock**

The City's involvement in the implementation of programs directed to the SRO stock can be classified in the following three categories:

1. Direct participation in rehabilitation of the current SRO stock
2. Re-zoning
3. Provision of social housing units.

##### **A. Direct participation in rehabilitation of the current SRO stock**

In the mid 70's, the City through the Fire By-Law required mandatory introduction of sprinklers in the hotels and rooming houses as means of reducing the numerous fire



deaths which occurred annually in these premises. By early 1980s most buildings had complied with this requirement.

The City is also responsible for the administration of the Rental Rehabilitation Assistance Program (RRAP). The RRAP is a federal program which has provided a valuable source of funding to upgrade existing affordable SRO units. The RRAP program provides landlords of rooming houses and residential hotels forgivable loans up to \$17,000 per unit over 15 years on the condition that the landlord agrees to fix the rents at predetermined affordable levels for that period, otherwise, repayment of the loan is required. Since 1982, the RRAP program has facilitated the renovation of 1,350 units. This represent an average of 225 units per year.

The City provides the staff who prepare the application packages and who inspect the buildings to determine whether they qualify for the RRAP program..

#### **B. Re-zoning**

The city has made provisions to "protect" the affordable units of the residential hotels and rooming houses through zoning mechanisms. The current zoning regulations of the Downtown Eastside determine that the developers who want to build residential development and

want to take full advantage of development rights allowed in the area must build an additional 20% of housing units as social housing units. Unfortunately, this requirement for social housing cannot be met because it is dependent on the limited social housing allocations of the provincial government (Ben Macaffee, City Planning Department Pers Comm. April 18, 1989).

### **C. The provision of Social Housing units**

The City has not provided funding for the rehabilitation or construction of new SRO units. The City of Vancouver, through its Social Planning department, has acquired land and leased it back to non-profit societies or co-operative groups at 75% of its market value for 61 years. This enabled groups to meet Federal Maximum Unit Price guidelines for social housing. With this assistance, non-profit groups have built self-contained studios for single people. These units are not SROs in the traditional sense, however, they could be considered to be "modern" SROs and they are more in accordance with the standard of living of our times when most people prefer to live in self-contained units.

There are 1,216 social housing units for low income singles in the Downtown Eastside (Social Planning Department 1986, 6). These units range in size from 300 sq. ft. to 490

sq.ft. including balconies where site and financial considerations allow. These units are slightly smaller than a one bedroom unit and supply a separate sleeping room, bathroom, and living space. The kitchens are compact and easy to maintain by elderly and disabled residents.

Social housing units for families and singles have provided affordable and secure housing to the residents of the Downtown Eastside. Social housing has increased the social and economic mix of the area. Families and singles from different socio-economic backgrounds live in the same housing projects. This socio-economic mix is very beneficial for an area such like the Downtown Eastside where mostly single elderly men live.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

#### 5.1 The Research Questions

##### A. Who lives in SROs ?

The residents of Toronto's rooming houses constitute a more heterogeneous group of single men and women of diverse age groups and socio-economic backgrounds, many of whom are employed in service sector occupations. As in the case of Vancouver, a great percentage of the residents of Toronto's rooming houses are unemployed because of permanent physical and mental disabilities. Their average income is \$467 a month. The residents of rooming houses who are unemployed usually have jobs in the service sector. Their income ranges between \$9,500 and \$10,800.

Vancouver's SROs constitute a permanent form of accommodation for a homogeneous type of population consisting primarily, although not exclusively, of low income single older males whose average age is 51 years. The majority of the residents of Vancouver's SROs are not part of the labor force because they have permanent physical or mental disabilities and They receive income assistance. The average income of an SRO resident is \$480 a month. In

recent years, SRO's have began to house a greater percentage of younger men and women. A large percentage of SRO residents have lived in their accommodation for many years because of the close proximity of their units to friends and to services such as transportation, shopping and social service agencies. Recently, many others have joined the ranks of the permanent residents of SROs because they cannot afford self-contained rental accommodation. Others choose SROs as a short-term accommodation while they settle in Vancouver or solve temporary financial problems.

Contrary to what has been commonly assumed, the residents of residential hotels and rooming houses are not transient. Low income singles are often confined to living in single rooms by virtue of their low income. The lack of affordable self-contained rental units in Toronto and in Vancouver makes it virtually impossible for low income singles to find another type of rental accommodation and consequently they have to remain in an SRO unit. SRO residents might move frequently but they do so within the SRO stock. Transiency is not a preferred lifestyle. It is imposed on them. Many are forced to look for new accommodation frequently when they are displaced from their homes.

## **B. What is The Role of SRO Housing?**

The primary role of SRO accommodation has not changed since this type of housing first emerged. SROs provided affordable rental accommodation to single men and families during times of extreme shortage of affordable rental housing. Today, one hundred years after SROs first emerged in Canadian cities, they still provide affordable accommodation for many low income households.

SRO housing is an important element of the rental housing sector in Vancouver and in Toronto. SROs constitute the housing of last resort before homelessness. SROs currently house very low income tenants who would otherwise not be able to find accommodation. The loss of SRO units has been frequently linked to the rapid increase in homelessness in North American cities . The renovation programs of SRO units currently in place in cities such as Los Angeles, Portland, and San Diego indicate that the local administration in these cities view SROs as a valuable housing resource for low income singles.

Despite their important role in the rental sector of major cities, the majority of SROs do not constitute an adequate form of housing. SRO units in social housing projects are an exception. The adequacy of SRO living can be examined in four separate components.

Shared Accommodation. Living in rooming houses or in residential hotels implies the sharing of either cooking or bathroom facilities with others. Many people living in SRO units today would prefer to live in self-contained units where they would enjoy greater privacy and could maintain their premises in better condition. However, the rental housing market of Vancouver and Toronto dictate that many low income renters either share self-contained apartments or that they live in SROs. Living in shared accommodation might be considered a thing of the past by current Canadian housing standards. However, it is becoming an increasingly popular method of coping with the high housing costs in Toronto and Vancouver.

Affordability. Thirty percent of the household's income is considered to be the housing affordability line beyond which a household is considered to be paying too much for housing. SRO units are more affordable than the bachelor and one bedroom units in Vancouver and in Toronto, yet many tenants living in SRO's pay between 50% and 75% of their incomes on housing, much of which is substandard. The rents of SRO units in social housing projects do not exceed 30% of the tenant's income.

Physical Condition. SROs comprise some of the city's oldest housing stock and has been deteriorating over time. Landlords have been reluctant to do any major repairs on the premises arguing that the rents they collect are too low to leave them with enough money to repair the buildings.

The lack of cleanliness and the need for major repairs in some of the buildings poses a threat to the physical integrity of the residents. Moreover, the lack of supervision means that some of these buildings are used frequently by drug dealers. Municipal governments have not been very successful in enforcing the building and fire code regulations which would improve the physical condition of these buildings. In Toronto, the illegal rooming houses are those with the worse housing conditions. These operations are difficult to detect and the municipality only initiates action against them if there are complaints by neighbors. The City of Vancouver enforces the building codes sparingly, knowing that the closure of SRO establishments might lead to the eviction of the low income tenants.

The physical condition of non-profit rooming houses as well as that of licensed rooming houses in Toronto is adequate because they comply with the fire and building code requirements.



Security of tenure. SROs play an essential role in the rental housing market, yet their residents have very unstable tenure rights. The residents of Vancouver's SROs, at the present time, lack any security of tenure.

Legislation granting security of tenure to residents of residential hotels and rooming houses is expected to be drafted in the near future. The Ontario Landlord and Tenant Act grants security of tenure to the residents of Toronto's rooming houses. However, this legislation is still inadequate. The litigation process is very long and many tenants are not willing to subject themselves to the process.

### **C. How Fast is The SRO Stock Being Lost?**

In the case of Toronto, the rate of loss of SRO units is impossible to determine because there has not been any regular inventory of the legal and illegal stock of rooming houses. Walking through the inner city neighborhoods where the largest stock of rooming houses is concentrated provide an indication of how this rooming house stock is changing. These neighborhoods are becoming gentrified and many rooming houses are being deconverted to single family homes.

In the case of Vancouver, there is data available on the rate of loss of SRO units in the Downtown Eastside. Between 1978 and 1984, the SRO stock decreased at a rate of

1.7% per year; between 1984 and 1986, the SRO stock has decreased at a rate of 3% annually. In addition to the units that are permanently lost as a result of demolition or conversion, there are those units which are becoming increasingly deteriorated. These units, although still part of the SRO stock, can be considered lost because their substandard condition makes them unfit for human habitation.

**D. What is The Effect of Social Housing on The SRO Stock ?**

Toronto. Provincially and municipally funded social housing programs have been highly beneficial for the SRO stock of the city. These programs have provided the necessary flexibility to enable non-profit groups to build new rooming house units and to purchase and renovate existing rooming houses. These initiatives have permitted the preservation of existing rooming houses and have added new SRO units to the traditional rooming house stock of the city.

The SRO units in social housing projects are affordable and constitute good quality housing. The ownership of these projects by a non-profit corporation guarantees the long term affordability of the units.

Vancouver. Provincial and Municipal housing funds not been directed to renovate units in the existing residential hotels and rooming houses. Non-profit housing groups have taken advantage of provincial and municipal housing programs to build social housing for families and single people. The social housing units for single people are not traditional SRO units. These new units are self-contained studios with a separate bed alcove. These units may vary in size from 300 square feet to 490 square feet including balconies where site and financial considerations allow. These units are only slightly smaller than a one-bedroom and supply separate sleeping room, bathroom, and living space. Kitchens are generally left open to increase the feeling of spaciousness. These units are compact and easy to maintain by elderly and disabled residents.

Social housing units for single people are preferred by the residents of the Downtown Eastside because they are larger and better equipped. The social housing units do not pose a threat to market SRO units nor are they replacing them because they are not being produced in large enough numbers. The DERA Housing Society alone has a waiting list of 3,000 people for social housing.

**E. What is The Role of SRO units in the Provincial Housing Policy of Ontario and British Columbia, and in The municipal Housing Policies of Toronto and Vancouver ?**

Provincial Level: Ontario. SROs have become an essential component of Ontario's housing policy particularly since 1987, following the declaration of the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless. Provincial housing programs fund the rehabilitation of existing rooming houses and creation of new rooming house units. In addition, the province of Ontario has extended the Landlord and Tenant Protection Act to residents of rooming houses and has included rooming houses with more than four units in the legislation which protects the rental stock from demolition or conversion. These actions recognize the important role of SROs in Toronto's rental housing stock.

Furthermore, rooming houses are specifically cited in the provincial Housing Policy Statement encouraging residential intensification. Rooming houses are seen as one of the housing forms to be promoted in residential intensification programs throughout the province.

Municipal Level: Toronto. City of Toronto policy towards the rooming house stock has been ambivalent.

The City forced the closure of many bachelorettes during the early 1980's and it imposed stricter zoning controls which decreased the ability of the rooming house sector to provide much needed affordable accommodation for singles. In April 1988, the City prohibited the additional creation of rooming houses in the West End of Toronto for a period of six months. These actions against the rooming house stock reflected the concern of city officials with respect to the effect of rooming houses on the character and property values of neighborhoods.

The City has recently adopted positive steps towards the rooming house stock. It has developed new licensing procedures to ensure that only operators with a good record are allowed to operate new rooming houses. It is hoped that with improved licensing requirements, the overall operation of rooming houses will improve and consequently their reputation in the city. Furthermore, the City is currently working on the harmonization of the municipal by-laws regulating the operation of rooming houses and in the relaxation of zoning controls to allow the expansion of rooming houses to other areas of the city.

Provincial legislation: British Columbia. SROs have no status in the housing policy of British Columbia. Provincial funding for non-profit housing has been focussed

solely on new social housing units for families and single people, not for the renovation of existing SRO establishments.

At the moment there is no legislation which protects the residential hotels and rooming houses of Vancouver from demolition or conversion. There is also not provincial legislation which provides security of tenure protection to the SRO residents. Failure to protect the stock and its residents makes SRO units the casualties of major inner city development projects and rising land prices.

Municipal housing policy: Vancouver. SROs play a residual role in the City of Vancouver's housing policy. The City has directed its action towards SROs mainly by enforcing the sprinkler bylaw and administering the rental RRAP program which provides federal funds to rehabilitate SRO units<sup>7</sup>. Vancouver's Social Planning Department has played a very important role in conducting surveys of the SRO stock and residents of the Downtown Eastside. These studies are an important contribution to the knowledge and understanding of the housing needs and problems of the residents in the Downtown Eastside.

<sup>7</sup> In the 1989 Federal Budget, however, the rental RRAP program was discontinued.

**F. What is the future of SRO accommodation ?**

The future of SRO accommodation can be examined by looking at the potential demand for this type of housing and at the factors which affect the supply of the SRO stock.

Toronto. The number of one person households has continued to increase in the past five years. Between 1981 and 1986, the total number of households in the City of Toronto increased by 5%. In 1986, 37% of all households in the City of Toronto are one person households.

The supply of new market units in rooming houses is highly dependant on the operation of the real estate market, the implementation of speedier licensing requirements, and on the relaxation of zoning by-laws. A great deal of the illegal rooming house stock in Toronto has been created as an interim use of the property in expectation of the short-term real estate gains on the property. It has been estimated that between September 1986 and May 1988, the average resale price of residential properties in the City of Toronto was 58%. Escalating land prices is an incentive to the creation of rooming houses. If this active real estate market continues, the supply of new rooming house units will also continue.

The preservation of the existing rooming house stock is highly dependent on the stronger application of the current Rental Housing Protection Act (RHPA) as well as on the elimination or modification of two of its exemptions: vacant buildings and rental buildings with less than four rental units. Furthermore, a stronger enforcement of the Landlord and Tenant Act would prevent the operators from evicting their tenants and consequently arguing that their building is vacant so that it can be exempt from the RHPA. In order for the Landlord and Tenant Act to be more efficient, a widespread information campaign among rooming house tenants regarding their tenure rights and a reform of the appeal process might be necessary.

The development of effective regulations directed to protect these valuable rental units found in rooming houses and their residents is a necessary avenue in order to harmonize the presence of the one of the last resorts of affordable housing in inner city areas with expanding gentrification and redevelopment projects. SRO stock is important for inner city neighborhoods. It adds diversity to these neighborhoods and it provides affordable housing for low income singles. Without SROs there would be added burden to the already crowded emergency shelters of Toronto.



Vancouver. The number of one person households has increased by 1% since the 1981 census. The results of the 1986 Census indicates that the one person household constitutes 39% of all the households of Vancouver.

The future of SRO accommodation in Vancouver does not look very promising. The lack of provincial legislation protecting the rental stock and guaranteeing security of tenure to SRO tenants, along with the limited involvement of the provincial and municipal governments in the preservation of the existing SRO stock paint a bleak picture for the continued survival of SROs.

The lack of regulatory measures directed to protect the stock and its residents becomes crucial for the future of SROs in Vancouver, in light of the major redevelopment projects proposed for the North Shore of False Creek. The largest project in the False Creek area encompasses the former Expo lands, now owned mainly by Concord Pacific Developments Ltd. A mixed use neighborhood is proposed for this site including residential, commercial, retail, community facilities, and park uses. Rezoning proposals for an International Village, the portion of the Expo lands closest to the Downtown Eastside, are already in place. A total of 176 social housing units have been approved for the International Village site; of these 88 units will be for

single people. The total number of social housing units for the rest of the Expo lands has not been negotiated yet. Another proposed project for the eastern end of False Creek is the Station/Lafarge site currently owned by the Bosa Development Corporation which envisages a 1,000-unit residential neighborhood with some offices, grade-level retail space, and community facilities.

The future of the Downtown Eastside as an affordable neighborhood appears to be grim. In 1988 and 1989, there has been a significant increase in land values in the area. Demolition of SRO establishments and conversion to other uses is expected to increase in the near future. The impacts of these major projects will not only be quantitative, in terms of total number of units lost or number of people displaced, but they will also be qualitative. The quality of life of the residents of the Downtown Eastside will be affected; the inexpensive restaurants and clothing stores which now provide much needed services for the SRO residents might be replaced by other establishments offering more expensive products which are not accessible to the low income people of the area.

The vulnerability of the Downtown Eastside when faced with strong development pressures is illustrated by the impacts of Expo 86 on the area. It has been estimated that

a total of 600 SRO units were lost and 415 residents were evicted from their accommodations. In addition, between 1,000 and 1,500 SRO rooms were switched from monthly rental to tourist rental status during the spring of 1986 (Olds 1988, 108-109). These numbers are considered to be conservative estimates. Another example of destabilizing effect of Expo 86 was the rapid increase in the value of land just after the announcement of the LRT station. This land increased in value from \$3 million to \$4.9 million in nine days (Olds 1988, 106).

The off-site impacts of the proposed development of the North Shore of False Creek might result in the disappearance of many affordable SRO units in the Downtown Eastside and in a profound change in the character and livability of the neighborhood. Even if their homes disappear, the poor will not go away. With \$250 a month as shelter allowance, one wonders where the average resident of a SRO unit can find alternative. Homelessness or refuge in already crowded shelters might be the only alternative.

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## APPENDIX I

PRIVATE SECTOR RENTAL STARTS, City of Vancouver (CMHC data)

1984	846 units
1985	275 units
1986	88 units
1987	463 units
1988	253 units

PRIVATE SECTOR RENTAL STARTS, City of Toronto (CMHC data)

1984	224 units
1985	309 units
1986	822 units
1987	628 units

## APPENDIX II

RESIDENTIAL HOTELS AND ROOMING HOUSES  
1970

