

Réseau de recherche pour mesurer la  
DIFFÉRENCE COOPÉRATIVE



Measuring the Co-operative Difference  
RESEARCH NETWORK

Parent Project:

***Co-operatives in Context: Race, Ethnicity, Displacement and Exclusion***

Researchers:

***Dr. Jo-Anne Lee, University of Victoria; Nora Curry, community Elder.***

*This project was undertaken within the **Western Cluster** of the Measuring the Co-operative Difference Research Network (2010-2015), under the leadership of **Dr. Ana Maria Peredo** of the University of Victoria.*

## Research Summary: **Strathcona Co-op Housing**

As part of the research project *Co-operatives in Context: Race, Ethnicity, Displacement and Exclusion*, Dr. Jo-Anne Lee at the University of Victoria partnered with community elder Nora Curry to document how, following two decades of systematic efforts by the City of Vancouver to destroy the Strathcona neighbourhood under the guise of "urban renewal", the Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association (SPOTA) worked through the 1970's to renew, rebuild and restore the residential character of their community, making use of the co-operative model.

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*The below research summary has been crafted using excerpts from several draft papers, as well as direct input from the authors.*

KEY POINTS:

**As a developer of co-op housing, SPOTA is noteworthy for several reasons:**

1. SPOTA's leaders were relatively low income, working-class men and women from non-English speaking, Chinese and other ethnic minority backgrounds. Their faces were (and still are) notably absent from the civic political arena.
2. The tactics and strategies SPOTA deployed to intervene in government decision-making processes and create the conditions for co-operative housing were new and innovative:
  - SPOTA used culturally hybrid models, principles and practices to achieve its goals and to leverage power.
  - Through its ability to reach out and collaborate, SPOTA nurtured grassroots political leadership that ultimately supported a significant shift in governance and politics at the municipal and provincial levels.
3. SPOTA used co-operatives as a *strategic* choice in a context of grassroots opposition and resurgence. SPOTA took a huge, calculated risk in embarking on an unknown path as a non-profit housing developer at a time when inflation was running at double digits. This highlights how co-operative and collaborative practices on the part of disempowered and marginalized groups were used to leverage power to bring about needed change in state policies.
4. SPOTA saw that the state was not a static, immovable monolith, but at times, open and experimental. By finding allies and cracks in state apparatuses and bureaucracies, and by building personal connections to decision makers, SPOTA'S soft approach was no less effective than more confrontational approaches. SPOTA strategically convinced various levels of government to provide infrastructure and resources it needed to rebuild the neighbourhood.

### **The co-operative model directly helped SPOTA to:**

- Stabilize and restore the residential character of the neighbourhood by building new, affordable family houses on vacant land.
- Ensure the city did not sell expropriated lots to commercial property developers and set off speculation.
- Build affordable housing for former residents and tenants, in turn helping to ensure the survival of adjacent Chinatown.
- Claim the right of non-mobility as citizens, the right to participate in decisions affecting their community, and the right to have their neighbourhood treated the same as any other residential neighbourhood in Vancouver.

### **FULL RESEARCH SUMMARY:**

In the 1950's, the City of Vancouver accessed money under the Federal Urban Renewal program to demolish the existing Strathcona neighbourhood, an inner city community with a significant proportion of residents of Chinese and other immigrant origins, which city planners perceived as a "blight" and slum.

Being largely non-Anglo-European Canadians, these residents were culturally isolated from the political elite who held the neighbourhood's fate in their hands. Racist attitudes of the day contributed to City staff and politician's view that the neighbourhood was a spatial magnet and incubator of moral degradation, whose residents could play no useful part in building a clean, morally upright and productive modern city. Lee and Curry observe that use of words such as 'blight' and 'slum' were really "a thinly veiled discourse used to justify displacement and segregation of undesirable city dwellers," and that from the City's perspective, "the mixed ethnic, working class, gendered and racial composition of Strathcona was a problem to be solved"—by erasing the very existence of the neighbourhood

In the first two phases of the urban renewal project, thousands of residents lost their homes through expropriation. Many single family dwellings were demolished to build Soviet-style public housing and high-rise apartments. Phase 3 proposed to bulldoze all remaining houses while compelling residents to accept below-market prices for their homes, and to build a huge freeway through the middle of the neighbourhood.

Determined to fight for their right to exist as an ethnic minority and cultural community, the residents organized to form SPOTA (Strathcona Property Owners and Tenants Association) and through the subsequent decade of tireless co-operation within and outside of their community, as well as social networking, lobbying, protest and other tactics, they successfully stopped the freeway and saved their remaining homes. The process of neighbourhood rebuilding which followed is an important example of a marginalized community using the co-operative model as a tool to resist race-based displacement and exclusion in Canada.

### **CO-OPERATIVE HOUSING AS A TOOL TO PRESERVE & REBUILD A NEIGHBOURHOOD**

By the early 1970s, SPOTA had worked to rehabilitate many existing homes and streets. However, a number of lots stood vacant in the neighborhood—a product of the City's misguided urban renewal efforts—and SPOTA knew it was only a matter of time before land speculators would buy up these lots with the eventual plan to build sprawling apartment complexes, thereby undermining the important

place-making work that had been done so far. Thus, SPOTA's ambitious solution to the vacant lot problem was to become a non-profit housing developer. By building co-operative and other affordable housing on these lots, SPOTA explicitly providing housing options for residents whose homes had earlier been expropriated. In addition, as Lee and Curry observe, "there was more at stake than merely saving the material and physical elements of the neighbourhood. . . SPOTA's leaders were aware that city planners and politicians perceived the neighbourhood through racial lenses." For SPOTA, preserving Strathcona was also about assuring the neighbourhood's ethnic minority residents a space in which they were free to build their own "social identity of civic belonging".

SPOTA's organizational approach was innovative: by creating a separate non-profit society called the Strathcona Area Housing Society (SAHS) with an explicit mission to build non-profit housing, it could access front-end development grants and loans provided by CMHC and the province's Ministry of Housing. This structure enabled SPOTA to continue to advocate on behalf of residents while SAHS attended to the everyday demands of building non-profit housing.

SAHS oversaw the construction of 228 units of affordable housing in Strathcona from 1971-1982. As Lee and Curry observe, "This is a remarkable achievement by any standard, but for a non-profit, volunteer-based organization whose leaders had no background in construction or property development, its accomplishments are particularly impressive." It is also worth underscoring the degree to which SPOTA had the mandate and trust of the community in this process; one can only imagine the reaction of residents in a typical neighbourhood today, if an organization proposed to build a number of multi-unit low-income housing developments on infill lots!

## **HOW THE HOUSING WAS BUILT**

In the 1970s, Federal government housing programs for low-income families provided loans, financing, interest rate subsidies, mortgage insurance and loan guarantees. The Provincial government also offered non-profit housing assistance through the Provincial Home Acquisition Act. In 1974, the BC Department of Housing announced grants of up to 10% of construction costs for non-profit co-operative housing societies to decrease rents during the initial years of a new development.

In the name of the Crown, the Province held title to Strathcona lots expropriated and cleared under the earlier Urban Renewal programs. SPOTA was able to lease 44 of these lots from the Provincial Minister of Housing. Within this enabling legislative and financial framework, SPOTA's housing portfolio rolled out in four distinct phases between 1972 and 1983.

Phase I, a seven-unit cooperative townhouse development, demonstrated that SPOTA had the ability to deliver affordable family housing. The project consisted of two-, three- and four-bedroom units built on five adjacent lots. The project was named SCOOP. Construction began in September, 1974 and was completed in February, 1975. All was not smooth sailing for SPOTA however: revealing once again the discriminatory attitudes at play, crown agencies and service departments employed various obstructive tactics to delay the ability of families to move in (e.g. the post office department claimed they could not apply a postal address to a project which did not comply with single-lot, single-unit development regulations).

When, at long last, these issues were resolved and occupancy permits were issued, the SCOOP project provided housing for thirty-three individuals: parents, grandparents and children.

It is important to note that SPOTA's first co-operative housing project carried a heavy burden to demonstrate that it could deliver its vision. In the eyes of a skeptical business, legal and political community, SPOTA had no track record, no financial backing, no development expertise and no trained staff. Furthermore, the idea that a neighbourhood organization would deliberately want to increase

density by building multiple units on consolidated single family lots was unheard of and untried. What SPOTA did possess, however, was a network of allies and supporters who were willing to put their credentials and reputations behind this project. Its earlier practice of cultivating social and personal relationships reaped dividends. Lee and Curry note that "SPOTA's ability to successfully deliver medium-density, affordable family housing in the downtown core amazed critics and skeptics. The successful completion of Phase I co-operative housing project opened the way for SPOTA's other ventures".

Due to various legal hurdles, the next two phases of SPOTA's housing projects were developed as affordable condominiums; however, the final and largest of SPOTA'S housing developments was once again organized as a co-op. The MauDan Co-operative was constructed on a large plot on the western edge of the neighbourhood, immediately adjacent to Chinatown. Securing the land for non-profit housing began in 1971, but it took almost ten years before construction started. Although the City acquired the land at a deep discount, it insisted it would only lease land to SPOTA based on the market value of the land, which was 3 times as much as the City had paid. The struggle over this site demonstrates both the tenacity of SPOTA, and the determination of the City to proceed with its agenda over the needs and concerns of the local community. This battle demonstrates again the strategic use that SPOTA made of housing co-operatives to help residents assert their right to remain in their homes and neighbourhood, to be treated with respect and fairness, and to have a say in the future of their neighbourhood: in other words, to be treated like any other residents of Vancouver.

## **HOW THE DEVELOPMENTS WERE MANAGED**

Representatives from SPOTA as well as each phase of the co-operative housing they built were eligible to sit on the Board of SAHS. Administratively, SPOTA took responsibility for determining the type of tenure, financing and design, as well as the selection criteria for prospective residents. SAHS was responsible for day-to-day decisions; liaison with staff and consultants; authorizing payments; interviewing and selecting applicants; and final approval on design and construction decisions. SPOTA did not wish to be a landlord and built no rental housing. All land was leased from the provincial government and after homes were constructed, the leases were passed on to individual purchasers.

As each phase of co-operative housing was completed, SPOTA turned the management of units over to homeowners as members of their own co-operative management society. Principles of democratic participation in decision making guided SPOTA's decisions at every turn. SAHS provided continuity and support to fledgling co-operative and condo management boards, with the goal of homeowners taking over day-to-day operational decisions. In addition, SAHS arranged educational and support workshops, connecting new boards with suitable bilingual consultants, liaising with the architect and construction firm, and perhaps most importantly, helping to smooth over misunderstandings and flare-ups. SPOTA officially, publicly and graciously welcomed and celebrated the new owners into the community, seeing their commitment to own and live in the neighbourhood as the fulfillment of its original mission and vision to restore the residential neighbourhood and to allow former displaced residents to return.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The effects of cooperation in Strathcona in the 1970s—whether among residents, between the neighbourhood and the bureaucracy, or through the formalized structure of housing co-operatives—had far reaching ripple effects:

1. SPOTA's cooperative tactics initiated multicultural politics in the civic arena as a force to be reckoned with. In sharing its approaches with other inner-city Vancouver neighbourhoods, and organizing cross-neighbourhood coalitions, Vancouver's political landscape dramatically

changed. These inner-city neighbourhoods worked together on common problems such as transportation, engineering, housing, policing, urban planning, downtown redevelopment, recreation and parks.

2. Neighbourhood residents wanted to determine their own future, and their example provided a concrete challenge to top-down planning by city bureaucrats and autocratic politicians who could no longer dictate the course of city development to reflect their own image and needs.
3. Today's small scale, local and "ethnic" neighbourhood character of Vancouver is an outcome of a history of working class, immigrant and ethnic minority citizens' common struggles to claim the right to place, to refuse compulsory displacement and arbitrary relocation, and to participate in civic governance and planning as equals. The establishment's plan to imagine Vancouver as a white settler, modernist project was ruptured, allowing an alternative vision of an inclusive, multicultural city to begin emerging.

### **Theoretical Conclusions**

In this paper, the researchers highlight the use of co-operatives as strategic tools in the larger politics of claiming and making place:

- If co-operative activities are conceived as strategies for accomplishing democratic objectives for social and economic justice, rather than as objective organizational forms, we might ask different questions about co-operatives that situate them within dynamic and shifting relations of power—for example—how do minority actors use co-operatives in strategic ways as a resource for resistance and justice?
- The decision to build co-operative housing in Strathcona must always be understood as a form of resistance in a context where racial difference and stigma were significant factors in the lives of residents.
- Looking back with 20/20 hindsight, the legacy of SPOTA's achievement is remarkable. The 21<sup>st</sup> century multicultural, diverse, and liveable city of Vancouver that Canadians are rightly proud of today sprang from the efforts of a relatively small group of women and men working together to save their neighbourhood and their way of life from obliteration. They accomplished their vision with few resources using co-operative strategies and institutions.
- SPOTA worked in strategic partnerships with individuals and groups from the private and public sectors to accomplish its goals. Co-operative housing was the tool that allowed SPOTA to restore the social mix that urban renewal had tried to destroy, at a time when market housing was simply unaffordable to the neighbourhood's low-income purchasers. It wasn't easy, but the crucial pieces were brought into presence by individuals who dared to imagine a different future.

*This research summary was prepared in April 2015.*

For more information on the Strathcona co-op housing research, please contact Jo-Anne Lee: <http://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/cccbe/research/home/members/profiles/LeeJoAnne.php>

For more information on the Measuring the Co-operative Difference Research Network, please contact Co-operatives and Mutuals Canada: <http://canada.coop/>