

Urban Studies, Vol. 42, No. 10, 1879–1891, September 2005



Book Reviews

Western Europe. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

SELLER, J. (2002) *Governing from Below: Urban Regions and the Global Economy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Finding Room: Policy Options for a Canadian Rental Housing Strategy

DAVID HULCHANSKI and MICHAEL SHAPCOTT (Eds), 2004

Toronto: Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto

453 pp. No price given, paperback

ISBN 0 7727 1433 9 paperback

This is an ambitious book with 27 chapters written by people committed to improving the conditions of low-income renters. The book grew from discussions started in a June 2003 policy forum hosted by the Centre for Urban and Community Studies at the University of Toronto. The authors include “community-based housing and homeless advocates, as well as policy analysts and researchers from the private sector, government and universities” (p. ix). The chapters are written by economists, professional consultants, government officials, industry representatives, housing advocates, politicians and former politicians, as well as some academics. All of the authors appear to be deeply concerned about the growing magnitude and severity of the housing affordability problems of low-income renters.

The book covers a wide range of housing-related topics. The magnitude of the housing and poverty problem is convincingly demonstrated. Canada’s distinction of having the most market-oriented housing system in the developed world is highlighted and its dire consequences clearly illustrated. The breadth of the housing and welfare problems are well presented and the authors describe the reasons for the decline in the affordable rental stock. The policy discussions are pragmatic and consider tax options, housing subsidies, welfare programmes, municipal planning strategies and other means to increase the low-priced rental stock and to ease the conditions of the poor. It is encouraging to see concern expressed in the first chapter by the head economists of one of Canada’s largest commercial banks. They analyse the problem, present its dimensions, discuss a range of policy options and conclude with suggestions for a broad approach that includes income support programmes, measures to spur rental supply, a homelessness strategy, provincial and municipal initiatives, mortgage insurance policy, stock preservation and

more. The weight of the economists’ report that is reprinted as the first chapter is augmented by the endorsement of Charles Baillie, the former Toronto Dominion Bank Financial Group Chairperson and CEO and the current Chancellor of Queen’s University, one of Canada’s finest universities.

The following chapters deal with the rights to adequate housing, the bipolarisation of income across tenure categories, children’s issues, social assistance recipients, discrimination, immigration, the housing–health connection and so on. As I continued to read after the balanced first chapter, my resistance to the book’s unapologetic advocacy started to mount. What about the harm of increasing deficits and the disincentives created by high taxes? How do you recut the economic pie without having it grow first? As an urban studies person who tends to favour more dispassionate research and greater subtlety in policy discussions, I was beginning to feel uncomfortable with the piling on of the difficulties created by the lack of affordable housing and the simplicity in the way these were presented. However, as I continued to read, the cumulative effect of the descriptive statistics and the convincing tale of the Canadian federal government’s abandonment began kindling discontent and fuelling outrage. I am not proud that we are ahead of the US in privatising housing poverty. The editors, David Hulchanski and Michael Shapcott, have succeeded in developing a moving and insightful critique of Canada’s current housing policy and presenting a rich palette of possible policy options. They put a face on Canada’s distinction of having the most market-oriented housing system of all developed countries. They bring together the concerns and ideas of people who see the affordability problem with compassion and from a broad range of viewpoints.

The second part takes up only 50 of the book’s 453 pages and is not as compelling as the first part. The style of the chapters reflects their origins as the edited transcripts of conference presentations. This part of the book presents ‘perspectives on the current situation’ by an economist, housing consultant, former politician and community activist, housing provider, community developer and a municipal policy analyst. Elyse Allen, the President and CEO of the Toronto Board of Trade, develops the business case for affordable housing. The chapters also discuss policy options and here I would have liked to see more analysis and more disciplined editing. There is some repetition in the chapters, but this may have been hard to eliminate in a work that brings together so many high-profile authors.

The third part of *Finding Room* focuses on the "Options for an affordable housing strategy" and again shows the complexity and magnitude of the poverty/housing problem. Steve Pomeroy, a highly regarded Canadian housing analyst and consultant, presents the strengths and weaknesses of a variety of options. Other authors express the need, elaborate and expand the policy options mentioned earlier. Overall, a wealth of recommendations are offered, but I am left primarily with the massiveness of the growing problem, with the recognition that it calls for the use of many and complex policy instruments and with the feeling that nothing much can be done until the federal government takes back its leadership in housing. Even then, my not being sure as to the tractability of the problems so well presented here makes me wish the book, already too long, could have done more.

The editors succeed in their aim to describe the housing situation of low-income renters and point to practical approaches that can help to improve their situation. But before going there, I would like to have known more about the underlying reasons for the growing problem. What is the role of globalisation with the dispersal of low-skilled jobs? Will global markets equalise returns to the factors of production? 'There can be no two rates of profit in equilibrium', the economists have been telling us for more than a century. With major reductions in the friction of space, can there be different wage rates across the world for similar work? Is it, therefore, inevitable that the poverty/housing problem will grow as the disparity in the incomes within the developing world is imported to the developed countries? Is the variety in the proposals offered in the book an indication that we are now left grasping for straws? *Finding Room* tells us how huge the transfers would have to be to reduce meaningfully the affordability problem of low-income renters. Is it reasonable and realistic to expect employed Canadians to finance such massive redistribution programmes? Is there any ground for optimism? The book presents no forecasts and ignores the politics that brought about or that might change the current situation.

This book is a 'must-read' for Canadian housing analysts, community developers, city planners and policy-makers at all levels of government. It is an excellent supplementary textbook for Canadian geography and planning courses that deal with housing or with market determinism. It can be valuable to the people outside Canada who are interested in the outcomes of withdrawing senior governments from the housing sector, in the range of possible policies that might stimulate rental supply and in the interrelationship between poverty and housing pro-

blems. People outside Canada may gain as much from this book as I did from Gael Ferguson's (1994) *Building the New Zealand Dream*. In addition, the book's concluding chapter by Alan Gilbert, Professor of Geography at University College London, presents an international agenda for promoting rental housing. But most valuable, I think, is the richness of the descriptions and recommendations brought to this project by the diverse backgrounds of its authors and the variety of perspectives that focus attention on practical ways for dealing with a problem that is growing in both extent and severity in most of our countries.

ANDREJS SKABURSKIS

*School of Urban and Regional Planning
Queen's University, Ontario*

Reference

FERGUSON, G. (1994) *Building the New Zealand Dream*. Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press Ltd.

Behind the Gates: Life, Security and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America

SETHA LOW, 2004

New York: Routledge

275 pp. £17.99 hardback; £11.99 paperback; £11.99 e-book

ISBN 0 415 94438 4 hardback; 0 415 95041 4 paperback; 0 203 49125 4 e-book

Given the increasing tendency for new housing estates and apartment developments, especially in our larger conurbations to adopt walls, gates and *concièrge* systems as a way of securing the entering and exiting of such living arrangements, I was particularly intrigued to consider what light an empirical anthropologically oriented study might throw on what it is like to live under such conditions. This study, as its title implies, endeavours to do that and more.

As I have already said, this is an anthropologically oriented study. It is not anthropology, as one might conventionally understand it, but a provocative mixture of in-depth interview material, observational material and autobiographical material. Each of these different sources of knowledge is presented in a different font in the text so that the reader is always aware of the source of the material that is being referred to. As a result, the reader is never confused as to which of this heady mix of data is being used to support the arguments being made. This is one of the strengths of this study that the author uses in quite a convincing way. However, this heady mix