Neighbourhood Change in Halifax: A Community Update

Date: Wednesday, May 25th, 2016
Start Time: 7:10 PM
End Time: 8:40 PM
At: Johanna B. Oosterveld Centre (2013 Gottingen Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia)
Organization: Halifax Neighbourhood Change Research Partnership
Type of Meeting: Community update

Dr. Jill Grant, professor in the School of Planning at Dalhousie University, introduced the presenters and some background and context of this research, stating they are currently in phase 2 of 3 of the project. The research is part of a national study, directed by David Hulchanski at the University of Toronto, examining 8 cities across Canada for ways neighbourhoods are changing. Researchers in the Halifax team also include Howard Ramos and Martha Radice, and a cadre of student research assistants. Local partners with the project are United Way Halifax and Halifax Regional Municipality.

Jill reminded the audience of data presented here in the Oosterveld Centre in 2014, which focused on the Halifax case, demonstrating increasing social and spatial polarization in Halifax during the period 1970 to 2010. Phase 1 included mapping income distribution across Halifax, which showed that Halifax does not have the extremes of low-income census tracts seen in Toronto or Vancouver, but there are areas in the city that are well below and well above the city average. Some areas of the city that were affluent in 1970 are now characterized as average. The general geography of affluence and poverty is changing, with areas like the south end of Halifax becoming even more affluent and large areas of Dartmouth having declined relative to the city average.
[The full study is available at http://theoryandpractice.planning.dal.ca/neighbourhood/index.html

Howard Ramos, "Perceptions Project"

Howard Ramos and Martha Radice, professors with the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, have been researching how Haligonians understand neighbourhoods and interpret neighbourhood change.

From a first glance, as Howard demonstrated, data on income distribution in Halifax looks positive compared to many cities, as the gap between the lower and upper income earners is not as great as in some cities. The bad news is that Halifax is losing its middle earners. Overall, there is a decline of the middle income group. He noted the big change in Dartmouth, which has experienced declining incomes. Some parts of the peninsula are experiencing higher than typical increases in average income.

Howard's current research includes three phases: phase 1 examined Statistics Canada data, phase 2 examines telephone survey data, and phase 3 examines interview data. They are currently in phase 2. The telephone survey asked residents about physical, social and cultural, and economic changes they are witnessing. Many residents said they did not notice much change. Most of those who do see change saw it as change for the better, although most thought that their

neighbourhoods had become less affordable. Residents did not see change in neighbourhood "civicness" (trusting and relying on neighbours). Residents recognized that there are new residents moving into their neighbourhoods but did not feel that people are moving away. They agreed that residents of their neighbourhoods are aging. Residents said that they do more shopping in their neighbourhoods now than they did 5 to 10 years ago and that the variety of stores has increased. Audience members asked whether these kinds of answers would have come from North End neighbourhoods, because they perceived there was no shopping for poor people here and many people are moving away. Howard noted that answers came from across the city, not just one neighbourhood.

Howard then demonstrated how the results of the survey show perceptions of change in neighbourhoods by region (rural, suburban, and peninsula). Residents of neighbourhoods in the peninsula and suburb neighbourhoods were more likely to perceive economic changes as for the better. In regards to social and cultural change, residents of suburban and rural neighbourhoods were more likely to perceive change for the better. In regards to physical change, all three regions either perceived their neighbourhoods to be about the same or changed for the better. Although people often describe Nova Scotians as resistant to change, the survey results suggested that those surveyed generally saw change as neutral or positive.

Overall, Howard noted that those surveyed see new construction, changing age trends, and new folks in the neighbourhood. Although they feel their neighbourhoods are less affordable, they are not resistant to change.

Howard then opened the floor for questions.

One participant asked why the maps showed that Burnside industrial park has a lower income. Howard explained that the data census tract identified by Statistics Canada includes the industrial park, even though no one lives there. That means that the map makes it look as if the lower income area is larger than it is. Martha suggested layering where houses are on the census tract map could help clarify what the area really represents. She explained that Halifax has been losing the middle income census tracts as the number of low and high income tracts have increased.

Another participant questioned the results of the surveys. At previous meetings they attended, people demonstrated how they are deeply unhappy about gentrification occurring in their neighbourhoods. Who does this survey include? How did you define "improvement"? Howard explained that they did ask in the survey if the resident had moved into the neighbourhood in the last five years so they could determine who the gentrifiers were. Martha agreed about the "improvement" comment, explaining that what counts as improvement is different for different people. Howard explained that people are more worried about change on the peninsula than in rural areas.

Another participant suggested the question about shopping in your neighbourhood was problematic because there are no shops for good groceries in this neighbourhood. Is this data meaningful when all of HRM is grouped together? Howard explained that we hope that the interview data will help with this, as it is more meaningful and detailed: we interviewed 50 people from across HRM. The telephone surveys painted a general portrait. Jill explained that the

survey results allow the researchers to further explore those more detailed issues with information on income (e.g., do people on lower incomes find it harder to shop locally?).

Another participant suggested the researchers may not be reaching the voices of the most vulnerable because those individuals may not own a phone. The research team agreed this could be a problem.

Another participant suggested how those unhappy about changes in their neighbourhood may not be growing in the same proportion as those who are happy with neighbourhood changes: is this problematic? Howard explained that they used a regression analysis model to identify the factors that influenced opinions. The analysis showed that young people are more positive about change, middle aged people feel more negative about change, and older residents feel positive about change. Residents in relationships saw their neighbourhoods more positively than those who are single or widowed. Statistical analyses of the survey indicated that factors such as income and number of years in the neighbourhood didn't have as large an effect on answers as we might have expected.

A participant asked how Halifax compares to the other cities being studied for this research. Howard explained that the bigger cities have more distinct patterns around income change. The central areas are wealthy, the ring around the central area is less wealthy, and the ring of older suburbs is the least wealthy. New suburban areas tend to be fairly affluent. As Victoria Prouse's research had shown, Halifax has much smaller pockets of wealth and poverty often in close proximity.

Finally, a participant asked the audience who was actually from the Gottingen Street area neighbourhood and about one-quarter to one-third of the audience raised their hands.

Uytae Lee, "Are We Losing Rooming Houses in Halifax?"

Uytae Lee, a Bachelor of Community Design student at Dalhousie, presented his thesis research, "Are We Losing Rooming Houses in Halifax?" He explained that his research on how rooming houses have changed in Halifax provides one indicator of neighbourhood change in Halifax. He defined a rooming house as a property where tenants rent a private bedroom (in a building with 6 or more bedrooms) and share kitchens and bathrooms with the other tenants. Rooming houses are an affordable housing option from the private sector. The team decided to investigate rooming houses because of concerns from the Municipality, Affordable Housing Nova Scotia, and other sources that Halifax has lost 90 per cent of its rooming houses over the last decade.

Uytae explained that a new form of rooming houses has emerged in recent years: quasi rooming houses. A participant asked how quasi rooming houses are different from regular rooming houses. Uytae explained that they have 6 or more bedrooms, but are not licensed: moreover, the target of their marketing is university students. (Often one student becomes responsible for recruiting other tenants and collecting rents to pay the landlord.)

Uytae then moved to his research questions: If we have lost rooming houses, how many and where? If we have gained quasi rooming houses, how many and where? He created a database of

all the rooming houses that he could identify as existing in Halifax since 1995. The team knew that Metro Non-Profit Housing had compiled a list of rooming houses in Halifax in 1995 to form the basis of a report it issued that year. Originally we hoped to get that list and then determine which of the buildings were still operating. Unfortunately, either the list no longer exists, or for privacy reasons the organization could not release it. Consequently, Uytae used a long list of strategies to try to identify rooming houses: Council minutes, online listings, city directories, classified ads, and media stories. He discovered that between 1995-2016, 151 rooming houses and 57 quasi rooming houses existed in Halifax.

Uytae mapped the rooming houses to show where clusters existed. The maps demonstrate how the locations and number of rooming houses have changed. Clusters of rooming houses that operated in the North End of Halifax and downtown Dartmouth in the period from 1995 to 2005 have now largely disappeared. Meanwhile, clusters of quasi rooming houses developed near universities. As of 2015-2016, only 17 licensed rooming houses were operating (licensed by HRM under bylaw M100), and another 11 unlicensed rooming houses remain. Many rooming houses have been redeveloped into higher end condominiums or apartments. A few converted into social housing. We could not determine the current use of some of the structures. It does seem that affordable rooming house units have largely disappeared from particular neighbourhoods, such as North End Halifax and downtown Dartmouth. [The full report is available on the project web site.]

Uytae then showed the audience selected pictures from Google Street-view of where rooming houses once existed and what the areas look like now. Some have been converted into high end condominiums and some have remained the same. Uytae explained that property assessments differ between quasi and regular rooming houses. The data suggest that quasi rooming houses are appreciating in value compared to general assessment increases in the census tracts, whereas the assessed values of regular rooming houses' declined compared to the average for neighbourhoods. Uytae discussed how rooming houses are represented in the media, stating 54 of 151 rooming houses have been reported in the media while only one out of 57 quasi rooming houses have been reported. Some addresses were repeatedly discussed in the media.

Uytae explained that most rooming houses are located in areas that are not zoned to permit rooming houses: the uses may have pre-existed the zoning and thus be "grand-fathered". Many of the current rooming houses and quasi-rooming houses are in zones where they are not permitted. Meanwhile, large areas of zones that permit rooming houses have none: he suggests a policy gap exists. Someone asked where the data on property assessments came from: some came from the Archives, some from Property Valuation Services, and some from Viewpoint Realty online.

Questions touched on many topics. Martha suggested that the numbers reflecting how rooming houses are reported in the media identifies the stigmatization of rooming houses.

Another participant asked if Uytae looked into how landlords are taking advantage of Community Services rent of $535 per month. Uytae said he did not get into that.

Another participant asked if anyone has looked into if there has been a change in feeling from the neighbouring residents in regards to more quasi rooming houses emerging. Uytae explained that would be a good topic for future research. The next step in the research project is to conduct interviews with those familiar with rooming house issues on many of the topics raised today.

Another participant asked how familiar HRM is with this situation. There seems to be little research on it. Uytae explained that the City knows where licensed rooming houses are but some properties are unlicensed. Licensing began in 2001 but current municipal records only go back to 2007: some information has been impossible to track down.

Martha asked Uytae where he obtained his data. He explained he got information from many sources, including Kijiji [searching it once a week for almost a year], Chronicle Herald listings, the Halifax City Directory (1995), and news articles.

Another participant asked Uytae if he had looked at the age of rooming houses: he had not. Someone asked where someone could build new rooming houses, and whether the process may be complicated even if the zoning permits them. Jill thought that a development agreement would still probably be required, even in zones that permit rooming houses, so getting approval may not be guaranteed. The participant asked if Halifax is essentially zoning out rooming houses. Uytae noted that it is worth asking what are the barriers to putting up rooming houses.

Janelle Derksen, "Upcoming Research: Rooming Houses: Issues, Opportunities, Policies"

Jill started the presentation stating that suggestions from the audience would be helpful for the next phase of this project.

Janelle, a master's student in the School of Planning at Dalhousie, indicated that the team is continuing its research this summer. We know already that licensed rooming houses are few in number and decreasing every year. Unlicensed rooming houses are in legal limbo, vulnerable to complaints, and not subject to regular inspections. Quasi rooming houses increased in number in recent years, and present special challenges. Even the legal definition of rooming houses has presented a problem for the city, because by-laws from different areas use different rules.

The key research questions for this summer's interviews are: What are the issues? What are the possibilities? What role does government policy play in the supply and quality of rooming houses or in resolving the current state of rooming houses? Janelle explained that the team wants to interview community members, including rooming house residents, housing providers, housing advocates, municipal officials (eg planners, councillors, etc), and neighbourhood association representatives.

Janelle requested that the audience could help by sharing information on people or organizations she should contact to participate in interviews. She also welcomed suggestions of questions to ask during the interviews.

Questions and question suggestions offered from the floor included:

How many rooming houses exist? We know there are zero besides quasi rooming houses. Are there any incentives to create rooming houses?

Why are rooming houses disappearing? He assumes it is not because they are not meeting a need.

Where do rooming house residents live after living in rooming houses?

What are the different experiences between rooming and quasi rooming houses?

One participant asked: Are rooming houses simply defined as a cohabitation structure or are they inherently affordable? Why does this research warrant years of energy?

> Jill explained that the national research team identified a common concern across cities about low-income rental housing: researchers and project partners thought that the stock was declining in availability, affordability, and quality in all cities. Student researcher Alex Kawchuk had done some earlier research on the rental stock in Spryfield [study is available on the web site]. The specific concerns about rooming houses came from our community partners when the housing needs assessment was being done in Halifax: it became clear to many people that this form of housing is disappearing quickly. We agreed to do the research to document the issue and think about what options may be available to continue to ensure good quality affordable stock.

There is a lack of rooming houses, but for whom? He stated he probably lived in a rooming house when he was a university student.

Do people want to live in rooming houses because of the social aspect? I have heard anecdotally that adults who have lived in shelters for a while find it hard to live alone and miss that social aspect. Another participant added to this question suggesting residents may live in rooming houses because of their life skills.

Who are the landlords of rooming houses?

A participant from the Housing Authority noted there is not enough affordable housing for single individuals under the age of 57. Rooming houses are not well regulated or organized. Is there anything that can be done on that front? A lot of residents have mental illness or have been incarcerated. The needs of university students are quite different from that population.

Janelle stated regulation needs to be examined.

What role should government play in housing standards? The City may shut down rooming houses for their poor conditions. What can government do to intervene? Is there data about what governments have done in the past? Did they shut rooming houses down or help fix them?

What are other cities doing?

One participant from HRM noted that the cost of living in universities is a driver of quasi rooming houses. What role do universities have in providing housing for their customers (students)? Uytae explained that universities in Halifax only provide housing for about 10 per cent of students. Residences cost about $900 per month plus a mandatory meal plan, so it is not surprising that students look for cheaper housing options.

Councillor Jennifer Watts noted that amendments to M100 bylaw are forthcoming (in June or July) with changes to the definitions and a formal review of the bylaw. A report is coming to Council. Are there other models of community members living together? Is there an ideal number of residents living in rooming houses? She has heard that a higher number of residents living together is better than fewer living together.

A participant noted that there was talk of regeneration of Uniacke Square. Some units are empty and could be used as granny suites. Is that an opportunity?

Jill concluded by thanking participants and asking that anyone interested in this project contact Janelle. Participants can also write their suggestions for contacts and questions on the papers being handed out.

Note-taker: Meaghan Dalton

For reports on our research please visit:
http://theoryandpractice.planning.dal.ca/neighbourhood/index.html
http://theoryandpractice.planning.dal.ca/neighbourhood/working-papers.html
http://theoryandpractice.planning.dal.ca/neighbourhood/student-research.html
http://neighbourhoodchange.ca/