What is happening to rooming houses?
Tracing an affordable housing option

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Abstract:
The paper reports on a case study to trace the trajectory of an often invisible affordable housing option: rooming houses (single-room occupancies). Documenting the number, location, and fate of rooming houses in Halifax, Nova Scotia, required creative search strategies. Conventional rooming houses meeting the needs of low-income residents in central areas have been disappearing, while student-oriented rooming houses have been increasing near universities. The study suggests that gentrification contributes to conditions in which older rooming houses are being demolished or repurposed as more affluent residents move into neighbourhoods. Large homes in areas near the universities are simultaneously being renovated as unlicensed rooming houses for students. In a context where rooming houses are socially marginalised and urban patterns are changing, finding ways to track and protect them can present significant challenges.

Losing affordable housing

When cities and the neighbourhoods within them are growing, affordable housing proves vulnerable. Economic and institutional changes influence demand for particular land uses, while shifting cultural preferences and government regulations that promote intensification and mixed use help shape the choices residents and investors make about urban properties. Urbanisation processes are generating transformations regardless of city size and national context (Skaburskis, 2006; D Smith, 2007): these processes include gentrification, which replaces lower status residents with higher status ones, and what Sage et al. (2012) call studentification, with increases in the proportion of post-secondary students and services for them in certain neighbourhoods. Such changes can affect housing affordability, influence local land uses, and produce increasing social and spatial polarisation, or divided cities (van Kempen, 2007). In cities experiencing rapid change, low-income residents face significant challenges finding affordable housing.

Urban transformation especially threatens one form of reasonably affordable housing: the rooming house or single-room occupancy unit (Antolin, 1989; Freeman, 2013; Groth, 1994). Sometimes known as a lodging house, boarding house, residential hotel, or house-in-multiple-occupation, the rooming house represents a form of low-priced accommodation where many tenants rent individual rooms on a monthly basis, but share kitchen and bathroom facilities (CMHC, 2002). Rooming houses provide options for tenants who seek independent housing while living near or below the poverty line (CMHC, 2006). Residents are often vulnerable persons dealing with mental health, physical disability, or substance abuse concerns (Dear and Wolch, 1987). Rooming houses may offer a lifeline from what would otherwise be homelessness (Argeriou et al., 1995; Campsie, 1994; Zabkiewicz et al., 2012). Those relying on rooming houses often find their tenure insecure, or may be at risk of homelessness if such accommodations disappear through demolitions or conversions (Gaetz et al., 2013).

Concerns about the loss of rooming house units are not new in Canada (Antolin, 1989; McLaughlin, 1986). Once a respectable option for single persons and families in the city, rooming houses began to decline in number after the Second World War (Campsie, 1994; Harris, 1992). Recent studies in Hamilton

(Mifflin and Wilton, 2005), Montreal (Alfaro, 2010), Toronto (Freeman, 2013; Slater, 2004), Winnipeg (Kaufman & Distasio, 2014), and Vancouver (Paulsen, 2007) suggest an alarming drop in availability, but statistics are scarce. The loss of low-cost, market-sector housing has received little government or media attention. Local government efforts to regulate rooming houses through licensing and inspection programs improves living standards in some units but may also increase rents or reduce supply (Freeman, 2013; H Smith 2003).

Rooming houses constitute a marginalised and largely invisible housing form. Creating an inventory of affordable housing constitutes a preliminary step in identifying critical issues and finding ways to improve regulation, quality, and availability. A report for Canada's housing agency noted, "Determining the number of existing units will enable municipalities to evaluate the impact of particular forms of legislation and regulations upon the sector. By tracking the change in the units available, the city can then determine the need to set up programs to increase the housing supply, or conversely, to permit de-conversion of units to other uses if the sector is found to be oversupplied" (Starr and Drdla, 2000: 7). To contribute to affordable housing initiative in Halifax, on Canada's Atlantic coast, we set about documenting and mapping rooming houses in 2015. This paper discusses the challenges of trying to perform what turned out to be a complicated task –locate the rooming houses—and describes the resulting findings.

We started with simple questions: How many rooming houses are there in Halifax? Is the number decreasing? What factors explain the spatial patterns found? Answering those questions proved more conceptually and methodologically complicated than imagined. We first had to define what we were measuring – no mean feat in a municipality using multiple by-law definitions of rooming houses while simultaneously addressing a new category that staff were calling "quasi-rooming houses" (Dunphy, 2005; Wheeler, 2014). Then we faced the methodological challenge of finding rooming houses in a context where no level of government tracks them, where agencies that held documentation identifying some rooming houses could not provide that information, and where those involved in providing and occupying low-cost accommodations prove hesitant to publicise the housing.

We first review the literature on rooming houses as affordable housing before describing the Halifax case study. We then illustrate the diverse and innovative methodological strategies employed, including extensive media searches, building permit data review, a year-long social media search, and comparative analysis of Google Street View images. The final section considers some implications of our findings. In part the story in Halifax mirrors that of larger cities in Canada and beyond: the loss of older conventional rooming houses in the gentrifying city centre while new student-oriented rooming houses proliferate in districts near universities. While the total number of rooming houses may not have changed dramatically over the last two decades in Halifax, the location and target market of those units transformed. Changes in the housing supply offer insights into real estate investment strategies and the effects of public policy in driving neighbourhood change. Theorising about neighbourhood changes and finding policy strategies to address concerns about the loss of affordable housing options depends on empirical insights from case studies such as this.

History of a housing option

In the early 20th century, rooming houses became a reasonable choice for people seeking affordable housing. Wolfe (1906: p. 6) described rooming house tenants in Boston as a "great army of clerks, salesmen, bookkeepers, shop girls, stenographers, dressmakers, milliners, barbers, restaurant-keepers, black railroad porters and stewards, policemen, nurses, ... journeymen carpenters, painters, machinists, [and] electricians". Such accommodations suited artists, actors, and writers (Freeman, 2013). Harris

(1992) noted that many people lived in Toronto rooming houses: 3% of the population in 1921 and over 100,000 in 1941.

With rapid urban growth after the Second World War, government financial assistance programs opened home ownership to the masses (Harris, 2004). By the 1960s, rooming houses had been reduced to an option for those with limited resources and choices (Campsie, 1994; Whitzman and Slater, 2006). Their inhabitants were often marginalised and stigmatised (Roe, 2009; Sommers, 1998). Associated with urban decay (Slater, 2004), rooming houses were targeted by urban renewal projects in North American cities such Los Angeles, Boston, and Seattle in the 1960s (Arrighi, 1997). Many rooming houses were demolished in Canadian cities as well (Mifflin and Wilton, 2005; SHS and Drdla, 2004).

By the 1970s, the first wave of gentrification was reshaping central districts (Ley, 1986, 1988). Young urban professionals began to renovate properties in centrally located areas with interesting architectural features and good access to urban or environmental amenities. Some of the large Victorian homes that had been subdivided for rooming houses were reconverted to detached homes or apartments. The combination of a gap in land values (N Smith, 1979, 1996), where increasing land values undermined the attractiveness of low-rent options, and new cultural values that led some people to seek properties in central areas previously perceived as risky (Ley, 1996; Skaburskis, 2010; Slater, 2003), fueled gentrification and contributed to the continuing loss of Canadian rooming houses through the 1990s and 2000s. As Skaburskis (2012) noted, gentrification most often displaced lower income men (the main tenants of rooming houses).

During the 1980s and 1990s universities in many countries expanded student capacity following changes in their funding regimes (Allinson, 2006). In North American and British cities where universities could not build accommodations to house the influx of students, properties in areas with student-friendly attributes soon began to show the effects of "studentification" (Allinson, 2006; Gumprecht, 2006; Sage et al., 2012). Large homes transformed into student-oriented rooming houses often became a focus of concern (Chatterton, 2010; CMHC, 2006; Freeman, 2014; Layard, 2012; Students Nova Scotia, 2014), since they changed neighbourhood character. As D Smith and Holt (2007: 148) explained,

> The concentrations of student populations have been intensified through the manufacture of "student areas" by private and public sector institutions … fuelled partly by the wider model of urban renaissance and neo-liberal agendas.

North American cities have encouraged the transformations generated by gentrification by promoting higher urban densities, pedestrian-oriented environments, and other elements of new urbanism (Dear and Wolch, 1987; Hackworth and Smith, 2001; H Smith, 2003). Many cities license or otherwise regulate rooming houses, to ensure minimum standards. Those studying enforcement in Toronto and Vancouver argued that regulation is uneven (Antolin, 1989; Freeman, 2013). Regulations increased rents and resulted in loss of units in San Francisco and Seattle (Durning, 2012; Starr and Drdla, 2000). In England, the Localism Act of 2011 gave neighbourhoods tools to adopt planning policies that may limit opportunities for student-oriented multiple occupancies (Layard, 2012). Government policies and regulatory mechanisms have significant potential to affect the housing stock.

Recent studies of conventional rooming houses illustrate the challenges facing the sector (CMHC, 2006; Starr and Drdla, 2000). The average resident of a Canadian rooming house is a single or divorced Canadian-born male in his late 30s to 40s, living well below the poverty line, unable to work or recovering from an illness or substance abuse issue. Many have mental health issues and need to use food banks, pan-handle, or scavenge to feed themselves (CMHC, 2006). Residents of rooming houses have higher mortality than others with similar incomes (Hwang et al., 2009). Houses are often old and in poor condition (CMHC, 2006); low rents may mean landlords lack the means to meet housing standards (Lottis and McCracken, 2014; SHS and Drdla, 2004). Reports of vermin, conflict, lack of privacy, and evictions

are common (Freeman, 2013; Mifflin and Wilton, 2005). Little is known about student-oriented rooming houses in Canada. Issues related to noise, garbage, and unconventional social behaviour may mean that rooming houses are generally not perceived as good neighbours (Campsie, 1994; Dear and Wolch, 1987). Rooming houses defy the image of domesticity conventionally associated with residential neighbourhoods (Harris, 1992): consequently, they have few proponents.

Studies of rooming houses have employed various methods, with interviewing stakeholders (Starr and Drdla, 2000) and neighbourhood field surveys common tools (Kaufman and Distasio, 2014). Case studies such as Allinson's (2006) on student-oriented housing in Birmingham or Freeman's (2013) on rooming houses in Toronto illustrate the usefulness of mixed methods. Given the low profile such housing has and the variable availability of data, researchers have to adopt adaptive strategies for documenting the location and history of rooming house units.

Rooming houses in Halifax

Halifax Regional Municipality (created in 1996 with the amalgamation of Halifax, Dartmouth, Bedford, and Halifax County) is a mid-sized city of 400,000 on the Atlantic coast. The 2011 National Housing Survey indicated that 42.9% of tenant households in Halifax spend 30% or more of their total income on shelter costs, higher than the Canadian proportion of 36.9% of tenant households (Statistics Canada, 2013). With over 17,000 households in core housing need, the demand for affordable accommodation is significant (Homeless Hub, 2015). At the same time, social housing is in short supply: nearly 1,300 people were waiting for social housing in 2016, with few subsidised options for small households (Chronicle-Herald, 2016). With income assistance rates low, a single person cannot afford an apartment in Halifax, but rooms in rooming houses typically rent relatively inexpensively, making them an option in the absence of subsidised units. Local agencies are worried that such units are threatened (HRM, 2015).

Charlebois et al. (1996) reported finding 146 rooming houses in downtown and the South End. Others offered different estimates in recent years (see Table 1). Fewer than 20 licensed rooming houses operated by 2015, with an unknown number outside the municipal licensing system. Statistical sources provide no public data on the rooming house option: rooming houses fly under the radar, virtually invisible (Freeman, 2013). Marginal housing forms can disappear or arise with relatively little public attention. A new category of rooming house began to attract public attention in Halifax in the 1990s, however: planning staff referred to converted homes targeting students in areas near the universities as "quasi-rooming houses" and rushed to modify planning policies to manage complaints (Dunphy, 2005; HRM, 2005). While local media coverage of conventional rooming houses (aimed at disadvantaged low-income residents) pointed to loss, news items on student-oriented rooming houses flagged concerns about alarming increases and negative impacts on residential neighbourhoods (Bornais, 2005). Although local authorities are aware of both type of rooming house, they had limited information on the number and location of units.

Table 1: Sample press coverage on rooming houses in Halifax

Loss of conventional rooming houses	Rise in "quasi" rooming houses
"In 2007, there were 153 rooming houses in HRM; last year there were just 25, and five of those are for sale" (Bousquet, 2013: online)	"Residents across Halifax, but especially in the south end, have watched with growing apprehension as former single-family homes and duplexes have been turned into apartments with as many as 12 bedrooms." (Bornais, 2005: 7)
"The number of rooming houses has declined by over 90% in the last decade". (AHANS, 2014: 19)	
"According to municipal Planning staff, the number of legal rooming houses has decreased from over a hundred to just 18 although they suspect that there are still about a hundred illegal rooming houses in the Municipality." (HRM, 2015: 54)	"A CBC News investigation has found numerous examples of buildings that even police and fire services call rooming houses, but which don't show up on the city's list of licensed properties." (Murphy, 2015: online)

In the 1990s, Halifax rooming houses were described as offering "very substandard housing" (Charlebois et al., 1996: 4). Halifax revised its residential standards with By-law M-100 in 2003 (HRM, 2012; McGillicuddy, 2007): the regulations sought to license rooming houses and updated standards. By that time, significant areas of central and south Halifax and central Dartmouth were showing signs of gentrification (Grant and Gregory, 2016; Ley, 1986, 1988; Millward and Davis, 1986). Increases in the number of university students in Halifax during the same period simultaneously put stress on the housing supply in the central city. Over 31,000 higher education students live in Halifax (HRM, 2015), with 43% coming from out of province (Mason, 2003). University residences accommodate fewer than 3,500, putting significant pressure on rental housing. By the 1980s, Halifax was considering legal strategies to prevent house-sharing by unrelated persons to limit rooming (Maley, 1986). In 2005 it amended the land-use bylaw to reduce the number of permissible bedrooms in houses in low-density residential zones near the universities, to control "quasi-rooming houses" (Dunphy, 2005): such student-oriented renovations circumvented licensing rules by avoiding keyed locks on bedroom doors and/or renting a house to a single student. Despite efforts to regulate rooming houses and reduce opportunities for quasi-rooming houses, neighbours feared a "student ghetto" (Ritchie, 2014: 4), with over-crowding of houses for international students (Luck, 2016).

We initially planned to update Charlebois et al.'s (1996): survey of rooming houses from 1995. Despite extensive efforts, however, we could not find the list of structures identified then. Neither could we obtain a list of the 153 rooming houses mentioned by Bousquet (2013). We decided to retain 1995 as the starting point of our updated study. We focussed on finding properties that at some point between 1995 and early 2016 were either identified as rooming houses by a published source (city directory, media, etc.), or that met the city's legal definition of a rooming house – that is, a rental unit advertising six or more bedrooms (HRM, 2012, 2014). We painstakingly built the inventory over a year-long period by an extensive search employing mixed methods. Table 2 describes productive data sources and addresses located through each. The research included systematically reviewing published documents, examining current housing advertisements, and conducting follow-up site surveys and Google searches to identify current use.

Table 2: Sources that provided rooming house addresses

Source	Dates covered	Specific addresses identified
Halifax City Directory	1995	80
News coverage	1997-2015	55
Regional fire and police services	1995-2016	22
Council and committee minutes - Halifax.ca	1998-2016	12
Registry of rooming houses	2007-2016	27
Kijiji.ca	2015-2016	62

We built a database of street addresses that at some point were identified as rooming houses. Multiple sources confirmed some addresses. We identified 12 properties by searching Halifax council meeting minutes, staff reports, building permits, and development reports. We requested any lists of rooming houses held by the city, which began licensing structures in 2003, but municipal staff could only provide records since 2007. City documents listed 36 properties, but some were attached buildings operating as a single rooming house: site visits confirmed 27 rooming house properties operated in recent history. The registry of rooming houses provided information on the 17 properties currently licensed[1]. Building permit data helped to document changes made to some of the properties converted to other uses.

The Halifax City Directory (1995), with detailed listings of uses for each property, identified 80 rooming house addresses in 1995. Field testing suggests that a few of those designations may have been inaccurate, but most seem correct. Media coverage proved another significant source of addresses, usually connected to newsworthy incidents such as fire, crime, closure, or neighbourhood complaints. We used the Eureka.cc database and the digital archives of local sources such as the *Chronicle Herald*, the *Daily News*, and CBC Nova Scotia: searchable data bases did not go back further than 1997. The media search specified 55 addresses.

Since media reports of incidents often quoted fire or police officials calling a structure a "rooming house", we approached regional fire and police services to determine whether they kept records of rooming houses. Requests made to the police and fire departments under Freedom of Information legislation in Nova Scotia provided 22 addresses, all of which appeared on the municipal registry. A 2005 article in the *Chronicle Herald* (Gulamhusein, 2005) quoted a fire captain saying that the city had 77 rooming houses on record, but Halifax Fire could not locate any list and suggested that the records may have been purged.[2]

To find currently advertised rentals we examined platforms commonly used for house-hunting in Halifax. These included Rentdonkey.ca and Houseme.ca. Online listings on Kijiji.ca proved most useful in our pilot testing, and so we subsequently focussed the search there. We searched ads once a week from April 2015 until March 2016 to look for room rentals in houses with six bedrooms or more. We located 62 unique addresses through that search. We also searched for ads for rooming house properties identified through other sources: in some cases, this revealed that the properties had been converted to other uses.

We followed up on addresses to determine current use by conducting site visits and examining Google Street View images of the properties taken in 2015. Google Street View has become a popular tool for assessing neighbourhood form (Mooney et al., 2016; Odgers et al., 2012). Through the history feature on Google Street View, we tracked images of the properties in 2009 and 2015 to gain useful insights into how the properties had changed physically in those years. We noted improvements or changes made to structures. To get a sense of changing property values for the buildings relative to the census tract they are in, we examined property assessments in 1995, using provincial data from the Nova Scotia Archives and current assessments from Viewpoint.ca, a local realty service. We identified census tract average property assessments for 1995 and 2011 as reference markers, using the Census Analyzer tool for Statistics Canada

data. We examined current zoning for the areas where rooming houses had located using Viewpoint.ca information. Linking ArcGIS software with the Excel inventory of addresses we compiled, we developed maps to illustrate the locations of rooming houses over time.

Our search identified 151 unique addresses for rooming houses and 57 for quasi-rooming houses (that met the rooming house criteria, but were not labelled rooming houses), for an overall total of 208. Although the search undoubtedly missed some rooming houses that operated in Halifax between 1995 and 2016, it offers a robust representation of local conditions. Table 3 describes the current use of the sites. Evidence suggests that 57 quasi-rooming houses and 17 licensed rooming houses operated, in 2016 and another 11 unlicensed rooming houses likely continued, for a total of 85: 41% of the identified stock. We could not determine the current use of 26 properties with the methods available, but it is possible that some continue to operate as rooming houses: if so, the total of remaining rooming houses could be as many as 111 or 53% of the total identified.

Table 3: Use of property in late 2015

| Current Use of Property	Number
Quasi-rooming house	57
Licensed rooming house	17
Possible rooming house, unlicensed	11
Current use undetermined	26
Reported closed, but current use unknown	9
Converted to apartments	58
Empty lot	17
Private detached house	4
Converted to social housing	3
Converted to condominiums	3
Fraternity house	2
Executive suites hotel	1

During the 20-year period, 97 rooming house properties (47%) of the total closed or converted to other uses. We could not establish current use for nine rooming houses reported closed during the period. Another 88 converted to uses such as apartments, condominiums, or social housing. The most common transformation left former rooming houses now rented out as apartment units: two-thirds of properties that changed made this transition. Four properties converted to single-detached homes, while 17 lots were vacant, awaiting new uses. If all the properties where contemporary use is unknown stopped being rooming houses, then Halifax lost 123, or 59% of the total known for the period.

Figure 1 identifies all the addresses located. It shows that conventional rooming houses clustered in central locations: near Halifax city centre, downtown Dartmouth near the ferry landing, and around the universities. Few were located in suburban areas. Figure 2 illustrates the rooming houses confirmed or potentially still operating in 2015. The findings suggest that rooming houses disappeared mostly from the North End, Downtown Dartmouth, and South End clusters—all areas known to be gentrifying in recent years.

- Figure 1: Map showing locations of rooming houses operating between 1995 and 2016
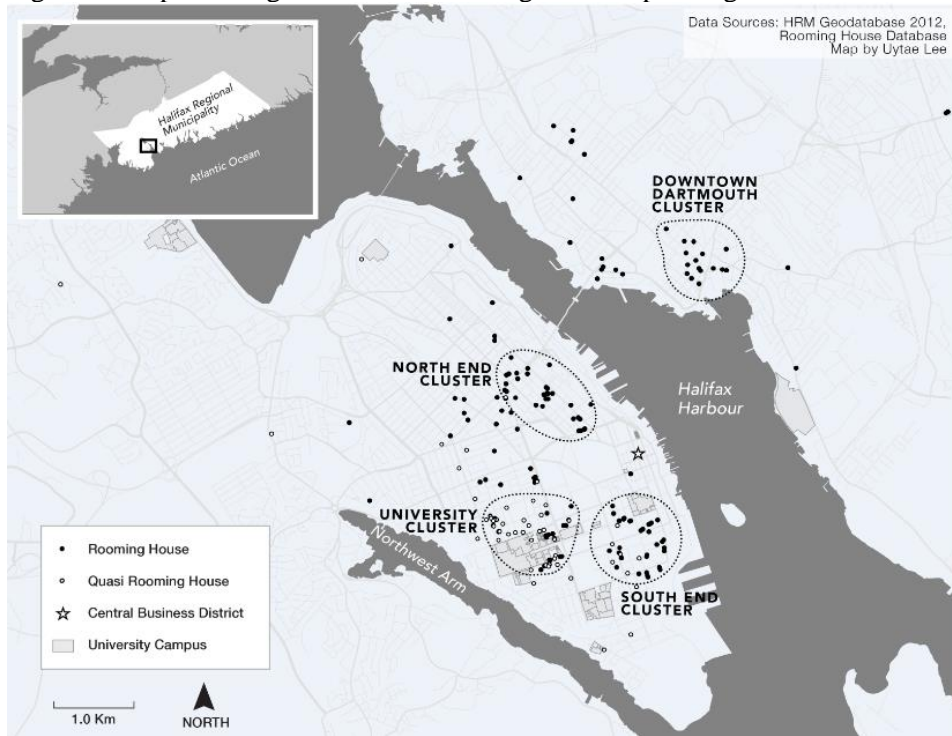
- Figure 2: Map showing the locations of licensed rooming houses (black dots), possible rooming houses (open black circles same size), and operating quasi-rooming houses (gray dots) as of March 2016.
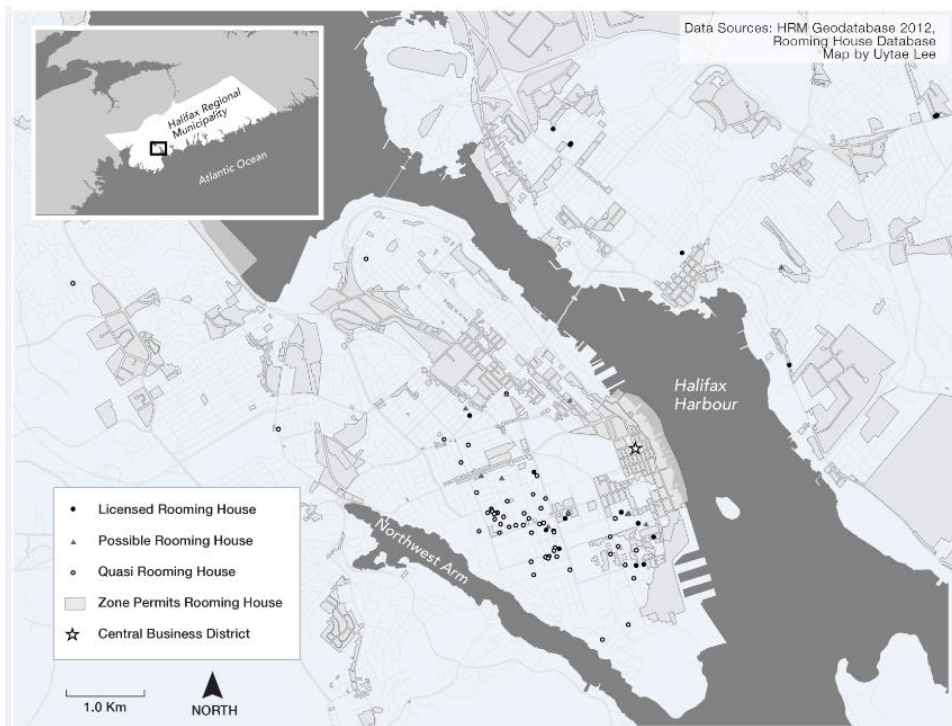
The North End cluster accounted for 35 conventional rooming houses, none of which continued as licensed rooming houses by 2015. This part of Halifax has a dense concentration of community services, such as public housing, cooperative and not-for-profit housing, soup kitchens, emergency shelters, legal aid, street health services, and addictions support. Until the last few years, the area was economically disadvantaged. Recent analysis, however, suggested that the North End has been gentrifying rapidly, as incomes increased and new businesses moved in (Prouse et al., 2014; Roth and Grant, 2014). Many rooming houses have been renovated or sites redeveloped.

Of the cluster of 16 rooming houses identified in central Dartmouth, only four were licensed in 2015. Until the last few years, the area had several services targeting low-income residents, including pawn shops and charity shops; today non-profit housing and a soup kitchen remain, but the area is changing rapidly. Redevelopment of industrial sites along the harbour have brought significant changes, with high-rise residential towers and new businesses putting pressure on lower-end housing (Beaumont, 2013, 2015; Simon, 2012). Several rooming houses have been torn down for redevelopment as condominiums or apartments, as the history feature of Google Street View illustrates and building permit data confirm (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Rooming house (left) shown on Google Street View 2009 replaced by new development shown for 2015.

Source: https://www.google.ca/maps/@44.6681337,-63.5611769,3a,60y,127.2h,96.96t/data=!3m6!1e1!3m4!1s5cF-ueJuot2eFHgPTgG_Eg!2e0!7i13312!8i6656

Near two of Halifax's university campuses[3] another substantial cluster included 19 conventional and 35 quasi-rooming houses: only three rooming houses in the cluster were licensed in 2015.[4] Quasi-rooming houses began appearing in large numbers in the late 1990s with higher university enrolments (AUCC, 2011). Almost 83% of quasi-rooming houses in Halifax are located within a 400 m radius of the largest university campus. These student-oriented rooming houses are former detached or duplex houses subdivided into bedrooms: for instance, an ad on Kijiji.ca retrieved on 24 May 2015 advertised a house with 6 bedrooms as one block from two of the universities. In some cases, former common spaces such as living rooms were subdivided, creating eight or more bedrooms in a house (Luck 2016; Murphy 2016). A recent staff report on proposed amendments to the residential bylaw noted, "The goal of these buildings appears to be to pack as many bedrooms as possible in them while limiting common areas in order to reduce the probability and effectiveness of weekend gatherings" (Traves and Fraser, 2016, 6). Some former rooming houses in the cluster have recently been renovated as apartments, while others have become fraternity houses or condominiums.

The smaller cluster in South End Halifax once included 33 conventional rooming houses: only eight were still operating and licensed by 2016. It also had six quasi-rooming houses, which developed more recently. The area is reasonably close to three universities, and near bus routes to another campus. This part of the downtown has grown significantly in population over the last several decades, as more apartments were built and university students moved in. It has not fared as well economically as other parts of the downtown where young professionals dominate (Grant and Gregory, 2016).

We compared property values for the rooming house properties for 1996 and 2011, using census and property assessment data. Average assessed property values in Halifax increased by 91% in that period. Seven of the rooming house properties saw assessed property values decline between 1996 and 2011, but most had increases. The greatest assessment increase (8000%) occurred for a rooming house redeveloped as a large apartment complex. Properties in the North End and in Dartmouth experienced considerable value increases (Lee, 2016). Quasi-rooming houses had assessment increases of between 100% and 400% in the period. When we compared average assessment increases for rooming houses and quasi-rooming houses with average assessment increases for the census tract (CT) that contained them, we found interesting patterns. Licensed rooming houses increased 14% more slowly in assessment than the average property in the CT. Quasi-rooming houses had almost 20% greater assessment growth than the CTs they were in, closed rooming houses increased 28% more than the CT average, and those converted to private houses 42% more than the CT average. Rooming houses converted to apartments and a hotel had assessment growth near the CT average.

Rooming houses are permitted uses in some higher density residential, commercial, and downtown zones. Our analysis of zoning data indicated that 71% of the conventional rooming houses and 98% of quasi-rooming houses were located in zones that did not permit them.[5] Even 13 of 17 licensed rooming houses were in zones that do not permit that use, but the properties are "grandfathered" because they were allowable when they were established. Large areas of the city where the zoning permits rooming houses have none: thus, there is a substantial mismatch between where rooming houses are permitted and where demand exists.

Marginalised by design

The Halifax example illustrates the ways in which housing forms that serve some of the most disadvantaged tenants in our cities remain marginalised in public discourse and largely invisible in community records. Efforts to locate and document the status of rooming houses—once a common housing tenure—proved more challenging than anticipated, and required a complex mix of methods. Efforts to track down lists previously used to generate published numbers of rooming houses in the city proved fruitless. Those who have such lists may be reluctant to release them because identifying specific addresses can make rooming houses vulnerable to public scrutiny that may hasten loss; alternatively, perhaps no one saw the lists as important to retain. The numbers of such affordable units are so small in mid-sized cities that public agencies do not report them in census counts or other statistics. Media accounts prove helpful in finding the "bad apples"—the rooming houses where crimes, severe overcrowding, and fires occur—but say little about decent housing. Internet sources provide useful insights into current and recent activities, but offer little data on earlier years. Tracking some 200 rooming houses over the last two decades in Halifax took hundreds of person-hours over a one-year period: not the kind of exercise many researchers can contemplate. The methodological challenges explain why we know so little about the loss of rooming houses in many cities.

The Halifax study helps reveals how recent processes of neighbourhood change contribute to the loss of affordable rooming house units for marginalised low-income people while increasing the supply of such

shared accommodations for middle-class university students. Although rooming houses were reasonably common in lower income areas to the north and south of the city centre and in central Dartmouth in 1995, by 2015 most lay south and west of the city centre, in areas serving university students. The major elements driving the transition were cultural and economic, although planning policy and regulations played a role.

Stigmatised and marginalised, rooming houses were amongst the first properties repurposed in gentrifying areas near the city centre. With the cultural popularity of central city living growing over the last two decades (Nielsen.com, 2014; Nguyen, 2014), central neighbourhoods experienced pressure on housing prices and changed rapidly. Without political will and policy mechanisms to protect private-sector affordable rental housing near the city centre, the rooming house properties became ripe for redevelopment.

Investors respond to economic opportunities. In the city core, factors related to the condition of the housing stock, proximity to downtown, land-use policies, and opportunities to increase land value favoured redevelopment. Planning policies since the 1970s have encouraged downtown redevelopment and intensification in Halifax (Grant and Gregory, 2016). Old rooming house buildings in these areas were often in relatively poor condition after decades of disinvestment. As neighbourhoods became increasingly attractive to those seeking central locations, many investors recognised new potential for condominium or luxury rental accommodations. As property assessment data showed, conventional rooming houses were undervalued relative to other properties in their census tracts, creating incentives for redevelopment. In situations where planning policies permitted higher densities on the sites, property owners had reason to pursue replacement options.

Recent losses targeted conventional rooming houses, which serve a disadvantaged clientele. Data showed that 57% of traditional rooming houses in Halifax were located within 400m of social services for those living in poverty. Those services arose in areas such as Halifax's North End because of its concentrated poverty. By 2016, however, only a handful of the older rooming house units remained there. As the cost of accommodations increased in the city centre, low-income residents have had to find housing in less accessible suburban locations, far from services (HRM, 2015; Klenavic, 2014; Prouse et al., 2014). Those who reside in public housing or other secure forms of tenure can maintain their central locations, but people dependent on less secure accommodations such as rooming houses were uprooted from their communities and support networks. The city became more divided.

Whereas proximity to social services was associated with concentrations of rooming houses in 1995, in 2015 proximity to university campuses proved a more important predictor. The growth in quasi-rooming houses reflects some of the same economic and cultural processes that reduced traditional affordable options. Halifax's downtown universities expanded rapidly in the 1990s, creating increased demand for student housing. Homes in the south part of the city were of good quality stock with large rooms suitable for subdividing. Until 2005, Halifax had no regulations to control the number of bedrooms in houses, leaving landlords with lucrative opportunities to develop income properties. Once regulations came into effect, landlords worked around them by renting out each house as a unit: this strategy effectively sub-contracted management to a student-tenant responsible for finding others to share the unit.[6] The cultural preference of millennials for the city centre and planning policies encouraging urban intensification created a supportive context for transforming large homes to accommodate more residents. Negative reactions from residents' associations rapidly led to regulatory changes intended to slow or halt conversions in the relatively affluent neighbourhoods. Experience has shown, however, that investors quickly developed adaptive strategies to make student-oriented rooming houses work. Moreover, the increasing relative property assessments of the quasi-rooming houses of the university districts confirm their value as high-returning investment properties.

Residents associations and local homeowners seldom welcome rooming houses. Few people speak up for preserving the stock of traditional rooming houses serving the most disadvantaged. Complaints about student-oriented rooming houses have also become common (Dunphy, 2005; Ritchie, 2014). The quasi-rooming houses may be protected, however, because universities and their students are valued as important contributors to the local economy (Grant and Kronstal, 2010; Students Nova Scotia, 2014). Moreover, students have the social capital to self-manage and are willing to pay a premium for location, making them an ideal target market for investors. It seems likely that studentification processes will continue by stealth even as traditional rooming houses continue to disappear from the market.

Some may wish "good riddance" to rooming houses (Deeth, 2012), arguing that they are poor neighbours that have not provided adequate and safe housing for the disadvantaged. New transition housing units opened up in North End Halifax recently to provide options for people coming out of shelters, but the need for decent affordable housing for single persons remains acute, as demand far exceeds supply. A critic of student-oriented rooming houses in Halifax argued for removing students so that "The area could return to its original nature - a gentrified, yet diversified neighbourhood appealing to seniors, and families who need a safe, convenient and socially supportive neighbourhood" (Ritchie, 2014: 10). The residents of rooming houses of both varieties are seen as disrupting neighbourhoods. In Halifax, university students who reside as temporary denizens find the shared accommodation option viable, despite community animosity. Less-advantaged low-income residents experience diminishing housing choices as rooming houses disappear from neighbourhoods near social services because those areas have become increasingly popular for those willing to take a risk on "edgy" environments (Grant and Gregory, 2016; Skaburskis, 2010).

Instead of improving standards for rooming houses, municipal regulation may inadvertently drive such uses further into the shadows where the stock becomes more challenging to track and protect. Efforts to revitalise urban neighbourhoods and increase densities in the urban centre continue to increase pressure on low-cost market housing forms. The Halifax case indicates that documenting transitions in the supply of a marginalised housing form may require innovative methodologies and in-depth study. Finding ways to staunch the loss of affordable housing options for those of limited means will require even more innovative policy and fiscal measures that governments seem reluctant to consider.

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For more on the research visit
http://theoryandpractice.planning.dal.ca/neighbourhood/index.html
http://neighbourhoodchange.ca/

Notes:

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[1] The city describes 19 licensed rooming houses, but in two cases side-by-side attached properties with individual street addresses operate as single rooming houses. Consequently, we identify 17 licensed rooming houses.

[2] Although it is likely that incident reports call structures "rooming houses", the Police Department denied our request for documents because the lack of digital records prior to 2005 would make the search too time consuming.

[3] Halifax has several universities: Dalhousie (with two Halifax campuses), King's College, Saint Mary's, NSCAD, Mount Saint Vincent, and the Atlantic School of Theology.

[4] Further details on results are available in Lee (2016).

[5] In 2005, Halifax Regional Municipality changed the land use bylaw for Peninsular Halifax to prohibit conversion of houses to quasi-rooming houses. Revised regulations limited the number of bedrooms possible in a detached house to five, and in a duplex (with two units) to six or fewer in total.

[6] Since the rooming house bylaw was interpreted to require individual keyed locks on bedroom doors, landlords may avoid installing such locks to avoid licensing.