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Realizing the Cooperative Advantage at the Atkinson Housing Co-operative: The Role of Community Development to Improve Public Housing

ABSTRACT

The cooperative model has become a reliable option to correct or soften the alienating features and dominance of private and public orientations to individual and social development. Proponents advocate that greater cooperation can build stronger communities that foster social cohesion and inclusion. On April 1st, 2003 the Alexandra Park Housing Project became Canada's first public housing project to convert into a housing cooperative, now known as the Atkinson Housing Co-operative. The conversion means that the residents will not only have the opportunity to develop policies that directly affect their lives but they will also be able to decide how to implement such policies reflecting a community development focus of solidarity and agency. The purpose of this paper is to describe the central role that community development had on the outcome of converting public housing to cooperative housing. In this paper I explore community development activities that transfer the principles and values of cooperation into organizational and community settings as the primary means to discover the "cooperative advantage".

KEY-WORDS

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT; PUBLIC HOUSING; NON-MARKET HOUSING; COOPERATIVE HOUSING; SOCIAL EXCLUSION; SOLIDARITY; AGENCY

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1. Introduction

The cooperative model has become a reliable option to correct or soften the alienating features and dominance of private and public orientations to individual and social development (Birchall, 2003). Proponents advocate that greater cooperation can build stronger communities that foster social cohesion and inclusion (Fairbairn, 2006). Efforts to broaden the reach of the model can be found across all sectors of society, including health and education. Within the housing sector cooperatives have flourished because of the focus of community development methods that support affordable housing provision that can lead to economic self-sufficiency (Ley, 1993). The success of the model in the housing sector has resulted in advocates trying to adapt it into contexts that were once the purview of the public and private sectors (Sousa and Quarter, 2004; Sousa, 2013). One such example occurred in downtown Toronto, Canada where an experiment in community-based control challenged the stigma imposed on public housing residents and properties.

On April 1st, 2003 the Alexandra Park Housing Project became Canada's first public housing project to convert into a housing cooperative, now known as the Atkinson Housing Co-operative. Similar efforts to transform public housing have occurred in the US and in UK (Koebel and Cavell, 1995; Rohe, 1995; Miceli, Sazama and Sirmas, 1998), but Atkinson was initiated by residents committed to improving the safety and security conditions of their community, and represents the first successful attempt in Canada (Sousa, 2013). A cooperative resource group and a supportive government bureaucracy worked with the community by building on the activist tradition as the means for the residents to take control of the housing property through community-based initiative and advocacy.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the central role that community development had on the outcome of converting public housing to cooperative housing. In this paper I explore how community development activities that focus on principles and values of cooperation can be the primary means to discover the "cooperative advantage" for disadvantaged communities. Including the introduction there are six sections in this paper. In the second section I explore the relationship between the cooperative model and community development. The third section is a brief overview of housing policy in Canada as it relates to non-market housing, of which public housing is a part. In the fourth section I describe the process that occurred in Alexandra Park to convert into the Atkinson Housing Co-operative. In the fifth section I present an analysis of the conversion by exploring the challenges of governance, member engagement and developing a cooperative identity. The final section provides statements intended to encourage the reader to take what has been learned from the experience of the Atkinson Housing Co-operative as an opportunity to revisit and reform what are often considered sacrosanct public services.

There were three primary sources of information that contributed to this research. The information illustrates a general pattern of the challenges and rewards that the community has faced since 2003. The first source relied on reviewing existing literature on the Atkinson Housing

Co-operative. As this conversion is the first of its kind in Canada there has been much written about the actual conversion, and this material provided the context for this paper. A second source of information was nine interviews that occurred over 10 years with members of the Atkinson Co-operative, government officials and bureaucrats, and proponents of cooperative housing. The final method used was a review of documents collected between 2003 and 2012. The documents included meeting minutes (including the board and general members meetings), and the organization's annual financial audited reports. The documents provided the opportunity to understand the impact that community development practices was having on the cooperative's development.

2. Cooperation and community development

MacPherson (2015) states that understanding the historical traditions of the cooperative movement requires an appreciation of the locations and contexts where they have occurred. While trying come to agreement on the historical lineage of the movement is futile, there is a consensus that the Rochdale pioneering effort to ensure that common people have the means and opportunities to control their social and economic fates has become the basis under which cooperatives function in modern times (Fairbairn, 1994). The Rochdale experiment was the first effort to formalize a set of principles intended to guide individual and group actions associated with organizing business practices that reflect cooperation; that is, cooperative business practices are intended to serve the best interests of the members of a community. As described elsewhere in this special issue, the principles serve as a guide to collectively shape an organization's identity as a cooperative.

The cooperative organization can be seen as part of a broader movement aimed at improving the economic and social conditions of those facing the negative outcomes of an economic system that prioritized profit over people (MacPherson, 1979). What makes a cooperative unique is the importance of equality and equity on an organization's business practices (MacPherson, 2015). For example, a consumer cooperative may provide seemingly typical goods and services, but the business will do so according to a set of principles that are considered socially ethical and sustainable. A further example is the provision of housing that is affordable to individuals of different incomes. One way that cooperatives have applied their principles has been the adoption of practices that reflect a community development ethos, which aligns with the ideals of cooperation espoused by the Rochdale pioneers (Watkins, 1986; International Co-operative Alliance, 2015).

There are numerous ways to understand community development (CD). Kretzmann and McKnight (1996) view CD as a process or a set of activities, both of which share the objective of reaching the goal of changing conditions facing a particular community. Green and Haines (2002: viii) provide a practical way of explaining community development: "a planned effort to produce assets that increase the capacity of residents to improve their quality of life. These assets may include several forms of community capital: physical, human, social, financial and environmental". What

is important to take from these descriptions is that a community possesses assets that are often a primary source that helps shape the potential for community improvement.

While the aforementioned explanations of community development is satisfactory, they refer to what Bhattacharyya (2004) calls methods or tactics. In other words, they do not account for what viewpoint or perspective is being applied when undertaking community development activities. It is thus also important to consider perspective as many CD practices can unwittingly perpetuate conditions that are more characteristic of private sector business practices in how workers and supporters are treated. Bhattacharyya (2004) captures the idea of perspective in the belief that in order for a community development process to succeed, the methods and tactics must focus on supporting solidarity within a group and foster a sense of agency within individuals. According to Bhattacharyya (2004) solidarity refers to a shared identity and norms, while agency refers to the view that humans are autonomous and have the capacity to produce and reproduce a set of "actions that reflect their meaning systems". For the purposes of this paper a community development perspective refers to a way of seeing or a particular point of view that supports a person's capacity to make decisions that affect their community and those actions that promote solidarity and that strengthens a community. For a community development perspective to be in place, one views identified assets as those that reflect a social value that are functional for a community rather than an individual or private business. However, the value and function can vary from one person to another or from one group to another.

A key characteristic of a community development process is to organize existing and recognized potential assets that can contribute to a community's wellbeing. However, among cooperatives a tension can emerge, as some believe that the business practices should take precedence in order to meet a social need, while other cooperatives believe that the two cannot be separated. The tension stems from the fact that there are different forms of cooperatives across different sectors of the economy (e.g. agricultural or housing). Cooperative developers face the challenge of providing the necessary technical training while instilling the cooperative values of equity, mutuality, and democracy. Regardless of the tension there is common agreement that any effort to apply the cooperative model must meet the social needs of its members while ensuring that the business structure is robust. Organizations that have followed the lead of the Rochdale pioneers have demonstrated that it is possible to balance this tension in the retail sector (Fairbairn, 1994), but when the cooperative exists to solely meet a dire social need (e.g. affordable housing) community development can take on a greater level of importance.

Community development is practiced in many different ways, and the determination of the approach should reflect how the needs of a particular community could be met (Henderson and Vercseg, 2010). For instance, supporting a social enterprise can assist a community's desire of improving the level of citizen engagement by strengthening the local economy or addressing systemic social exclusion. In this instance members of a community must become aware of the issues that contributed to the problems and that supporting a local business can begin to redress

challenging issues. For instance, supporting a social enterprise that is run by local volunteers can instill a sense of solidarity among different people. A sense of solidarity can foster conditions for developing a greater sense of attachment to the community or develop an understanding of the contributors of social exclusion (Wilkinson, 1996).

For this paper I view CD as a process that involves a set of activities intended to strengthen or build a set of skills that reflect a communitarian set of values of reciprocity and self-reliance that can lead to a sense of belonging. As will be shown, the Atkinson conversion involved meeting the residents' desire to improve their community as well accounting for a variety of interests from different stakeholders (Sousa, 2013). In effect, the aim was to build a sense of agency among the residents so they could make decisions that reflect their community's needs and were able to do so by building a sense of solidarity across groups. Thus, for all individuals associated with the conversion process there was a strongly held belief that the process was able to succeed because the community development activities reflected a mindset that emphasized solidarity and agency as the means to prepare the residents to become property managers and stewards of the community.

3. Non-market housing in Canada

Exploring options to providing affordable housing for lower income individuals and families has become a priority for governments and housing providers around the world. Governments in North America, Europe and Australia have attempted a variety of approaches to addressing this challenge, including: building and managing housing properties (referred to as public or social housing), supporting non-profit organizations through direct funding or loan guarantees (also referred to as social housing), or offering subsidies to the private sector to provide affordable units within their properties (as seen in vouchers). All of these approaches share the common perspective that supporting non-market options can lead to making housing affordable. In this paper I focus on the first two approaches, which is normally referred to as non-market housing. Non-market housing refers to dwellings that are not bought or sold in the private market and are financed by government or a non-profit sponsoring organization, and by the rental revenue. This housing is for use only, and once a tenant moves on, the rights of tenancy are transferred to others, without any market exchange (Dreier and Hulchanski, 1993). A major advantage of non-market housing over private-market rentals is that housing charges or rents rise only to meet increased operating costs.

Public housing—that is, housing administered directly by a government agency or housing authority—was the initial model of non-market housing in both Canada (Rose, 1980) and the US (Vale, 2002) and has become the primary means to offset the private sector's inconsistent ability to provide housing to low-income individuals and families. In Canada the federal government formed

partnerships with provincial and municipal governments to provide financing and land in order to develop public housing (Rose, 1980; Carter, 1997). The partnerships resulted in governments having a stake in owning and directly managing housing projects of varying scales across Canada (Rose, 1980).

By the 1960s, governments in Canada and the US realized that larger public housing projects were not feasible as they were too expensive to build and maintain (Rose, 1980; Sewell, 1994). Most importantly, many of the larger public housing projects received negative publicity and became known as urban ghettos with above-average rates of crime and other social problems (Sewell, 1994; Prince, 1998). The *National Housing Act* in Canada, which is the legislation regulating housing policy and practices, was amended in 1973 to encourage the production of other forms of affordable housing (Rose, 1980; Van Dyk, 1995). With the changes to the legislation, the federal government opted to limit its involvement to managing the housing properties (that is, public housing), and chose to partner with non-profit housing providers—cooperative and non-profit organizations—as the principal means to develop and administer social housing (Smith, 1995; Carter, 1997).

The new partnerships created two new and distinct non-market housing models under the category of social housing—cooperative and non-profit housing—that share the characteristics of resident involvement in how their community is managed, which in turn gives them a sense of ownership. These organizations were predominantly community based, and had specific knowledge of their community's needs, which is more conducive to community building. As a result of these changes, hundreds of relatively smaller social housing communities were built across the country. However, the social and physical conditions of the public housing stock have deteriorated over the years. In essence, as will be shown below, the conversion of Alexandra Park to Atkinson Housing Co-operative is a response to this social deterioration, which has led to a reconsideration of how a sense of community is understood within public housing projects (Silver, 2011).

The Atkinson conversion started in the early 1990s when, under the influence of neo-conservative policies, the different levels governments in Canada began to reconsider their role in providing affordable housing (Sousa and Quarter, 2004). For instance, in 1993, the federal government withdrew from financing social housing and downloaded the responsibility to the provinces (Van Dyk, 1995; Carroll and Jones, 2000). Following the 1995 election in Ontario, the Conservative government placed a freeze on building new social housing (even cancelling contracts) and started to change existing policies, a change that was intended to encourage the involvement of the private sector to satisfy the need for social housing (Ontario, 2000). It is ironic that the Atkinson conversion was able to proceed during the mid 1990s since there was much hostility by the Ontario provincial government to non-market housing. However, the Atkinson conversion was appealing because it demonstrated a reduced role for government in public housing while building a sense of community in what was seen as a problematic area of the city (Sousa, 2013).

4. Becoming the Atkinson Housing Cooperative

The Alexandra Park Housing project opened in 1968 in a vibrant and diverse area of downtown Toronto, where different ethno-cultural groups have settled for decades. The original residential conditions where Alexandra Park was built was described as "slums," and the new development was part of the city's urban renewal plans—referred to at the time as "slum clearance" (Social Planning Council of Metropolitan Toronto, 1970). It was believed that building a public housing project was the solution to the many social problems endemic to the area as it would raise the residential profile by providing low-come housing as well as reducing the industrial presence of the area. The intention was to create a property that resembled a "European garden city" with a series of pedestrian walkways that would foster community interaction; however, the unintended result was a maze like design that cut the property off from the surrounding neighbourhood (Sousa, 2013).

The Alexandra Park Housing project was one of the larger housing projects within the Canadian public housing system. Larger public housing projects are often depicted as dangerous and impoverished by media and residents themselves. The negative perception implies that there is a deficit of community, the cause of which is often attributed to resident apathy and lack of any financial stake in maintaining the property. There is strong evidence that the perceived absence or deficit in community is the result of government policies and practices that disenfranchise an already vulnerable population (Epp, 1996). Regardless of the negative perceptions and the stigma perpetuated by media accounts, residents of Alexandra Park overcame the negative perceptions by becoming leaders in establishing conditions that foster community-based control (Sousa, 2013).

The development has a total of 410 units in two apartment buildings and townhouses of varying sizes. The community is very diverse in terms of citizenship and ethnicity, with a substantial number of residents belonging to a visible minority group. There are approximately 35 different languages spoken within the community, and the five largest non-English language groups (including, Vietnamese, Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese and Somali) have traditionally accounted for over 50 per cent of the households.

A residents' association was established in 1969 because of a feeling that the local housing authority was neglecting the community's needs. The Alexandra Park Residents' Association (APRA) played a key leadership and advocacy role in raising concerns to the local housing authority about the challenging social and physical conditions facing many residents. The association was comprised of resident volunteers who were elected by the residents to the board of directors, and there was an active committee structure. The board of directors of APRA established strong ties to government officials and to groups outside the community. The association enjoyed many successes. For example, when there was no official space for them to meet to discuss key business issues they successfully lobbied the local housing authority to build a community centre, which opened in 1978. The centre is a point of pride for the community and was a focal point in the pursuit of becoming a housing cooperative. To this day, the community centre continues to operate programs and events for children and adults mainly organized by the residents, and is a hub for social gatherings and

volunteer engagement. In spite of the significant level of activism and resident engagement, the community continued to face similar social problems found in other public housing projects, including drug activity and vandalism. While some of the criminal activity was carried out by some residents, the majority were perpetrated by individuals from outside the community. These individuals took advantage of the project's design and of the community's negative image that created a perception of Alexandra Park as crime ridden, rather than vibrant and active.

In 1990 the residents mobilized in response to increasing drug activity and government neglect. Active residents were accused of being vigilantes, but according to the former president of the residents' association, the residents were protecting their community: "These are not vigilantes. This is a concern by community people who want to raise their families. They don't want their children involved in drugs. We want a safe and quiet environment. Living in Metro housing is enough, so we don't need these problems. We do not have any vigilante gangs here. We have a concerned community who want to live in a safe environment. It is only normal to protect yourself, but we are not out for retaliation. The reaction is to defend" (Hawton, 1990).

In addition to the security problems, the residents declared the poor response time to maintenance requests and a general lack of respect by the local housing authority as symptomatic of a systematic neglect of their community. The absence of a sustainable maintenance and security plan by the local housing authority and the police service became the impetus for the residents to seek control of the management responsibilities. The residents' action boosted a feeling of safety among the residents and provoked the local housing authority and the police service into action. Another outcome of increased resident self-determination was the local awareness that the residents' themselves could foster change through collective action.

4.1 Converting into a cooperative

The conversion of Alexandra Park has shown that combining a core group of committed residents with broader support can result in community change, which is particularly difficult in a setting that was not intended to be a long-term community. In this section I provide a brief account of the conversion process, which lasted over 10 years. Over that time there were sporadic periods of activity and inactivity. Since this conversion was the first of its kind in Canada, according to a source in the housing cooperative sector, "*There was no blueprint. Every step had to be created based on existing conversion experiences… while being sensitive to the uniqueness of public housing*". What became crucial for the process to proceed was the need to identify and build key local assets and not solely rely on previous experiences in a prescriptive manner. A key asset was the residents' association, led by Sonny Atkinson.

The residents' association proceeded to work with a cooperative housing sector resource person to develop a work plan to convert the Alexandra Park housing project into a housing cooperative (White, 1996). The plan consisted of three parallel processes: formally determining the community

support by a referendum; extensive and at times prolonged community development activities; and establishing the legal agreements for the conversion to proceed. The plan had support from both the cooperative sector and from the different levels of government (in principle). The cooperative housing sector supported the community's action because the conversion held out great potential for to increase the amount of cooperative housing and to empower a marginalized population. Provincial and municipal politicians supported the plan because they held out hope that a resident-controlled community would be an innovative way to address the complex problems found in public housing projects. However, moving the plan from conception to implementation created unanticipated challenges. In fact, dealing with unforeseen obstacles and great uncertainty became an integral part of the conversion process and associated community development activities.

The initial step in the conversion process was to hold a referendum in order to determine the overall community support for the initiative. During the lead-up to the referendum essential technical and education assistance came from the cooperative housing sector. Tom Clement, executive director of the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto (CHFT, an umbrella organization for housing cooperatives in Toronto), described their involvement as providing information about what it means to live as a cooperative. Following the community development activities that lasted six months, on April 22, 1995, the residents' association held a referendum on the question: "Do you support Alexandra Park becoming a housing cooperative?" The result of the community work showed strong support for the conversion proposal, with 72 per cent of the 65 per cent eligible households voting in favour (Sousa, 2013). The result gave the leadership a strong mandate to become a housing cooperative. According to Tom Clement, the vote also served as a mandate for the CHFT to become involved: "*The main area was to make sure that people had the information. We spent a lot of time door knocking, putting out newsletters in multiple languages. I know the ballot that people voted on was in over five languages. We made great efforts to make sure that people had that information not just as a flyer on their door but somebody there to talk to*" (personal communication, 6 March 2007).

As described above, Sonny Atkinson was the leader most closely associated with the call for increased resident involvement at Alexandra Park. In 1997 the community decided to have a contest with the dual propose of maintaining momentum for the conversion as well as finding a new name for the community. The community decided to honour Sonny's contribution by naming the cooperative the Atkinson Housing Co-operative.

Following the referendum victory the residents' association and the CHFT created a business plan that outlined how the new cooperative would function (Atkinson Housing Co-operative, 1996). The business plan was also intended to demonstrate to the housing agency that the community was serious about becoming a cooperative, which meant managing a public asset with accountability and transparency. The Atkinson Housing Co-operative was incorporated in 1997, but establishing a system of governance that was accountable was the greater challenge. One other area of ongoing concern was the lack of financial resources to ensure that the conversion process

would succeed. Although all levels of government supported the initiative in principle, they did not provide financial resources for community development activities. Despite the lack of financial resources, the CHFT and the residents' association decided to raise the necessary funds to support the conversion.

Following the 1995 referendum there were numerous delays for control to be transferred to the Atkinson Housing Co-operative, delays that would impact the momentum of the conversion process. There were significant changes in the community as well as changes in government policy regarding social housing. For instance, the leader, Sonny Atkinson passed away in 1998, which meant that he was never able to witness the increased resident involvement and local control he passionately sought. Sonny's passing left a leadership vacuum for many years after. Although there were efforts to recruit and prepare new leaders, many felt that they could not live up to the stature of Sonny (Sousa, 2013). As a result community support started to erode and historic tensions reemerged. Furthermore, new conflicts among the residents started to arise, a point that I return to below. Consequently, there was real risk that the conversion might not reach completion, as the residents started to believe that becoming a cooperative would not result in an improved community. The community faced the challenge by developing different types of leaders that understood the needs of the community both historically and presently. Fortunately, a new group of committed members emerged as leaders to see the conversion process through to completion, and Atkinson was eventually officially incorporated as a cooperative (Sousa, 2013).

In 1998 the new board of directors of Atkinson and the CHFT started to meet regularly with government representatives in order to develop a working plan that would specify the process of transferring management responsibilities. Since it was almost three years after the referendum, the government was reticent and insisted on further proof that the community was ready to become a housing cooperative. Therefore, in the late fall of 1998 the Atkinson board of directors and the CHFT held a second referendum, referred to as a community vote, and the ballots were translated into 19 languages. There was a total of 268 votes received, representing 65 per cent of the households, and, this time, 79 per cent of those voting were in favour, a 4 per cent increase over the first referendum. According to the CHFT, 45.5 percent of the votes were submitted in a language other than English (Sousa, 2013).

After the second vote, the board of directors and the CHFT renewed their efforts with increased vigour to get government representatives to demonstrate support for the conversion. A working group of primary stakeholders was established in 1999 with two purposes: to determine the legal steps required to take the different stakeholders through the conversion process; and to construct an operating agreement laying out the management responsibilities that the community would have once the conversion was completed. The working group met for over four years, and over that period the government continued to introduce obstacles and concerns about the community's ability to manage the property. As a result, the cooperative board felt that the discussions appeared to be more a round of negotiations and less of a working group. One key concern that emerged from

both residents and government representatives was related to the level of preparedness of the board to take on management responsibilities. The cooperative board and the CHFT deemed that further community development activities were necessary in order to alleviate these concerns. Despite the lack of funds, in 1999 the cooperative board and the CHFT initiated a comprehensive community development program and accelerated the membership recruitment drive[1]. The program had the following goals:

1. educate the community about cooperative living;
2. raise awareness of the on-going conversion process;
3. maintain momentum for the conversion to occur; and
4. recruit new members.

The community development plan targeted the major language groups by holding individual meetings for each of the six groups and producing newsletters in the six major languages and distributing them to each of the households. Overall, the community development program was quite successful (CHFT, 2002). At the time of transferring management responsibilities in 2003, 80 per cent of households were members of the cooperative, which is consistent with the results of the second vote[2].

5. Managing a public housing cooperative

The Atkinson Housing Co-operative is considered to be a hybrid model of social housing (Sousa and Quarter, 2004) because it is different from most housing cooperatives in a few fundamental ways. First, there is no income mixing so all members and non-members alike pay the housing charge on a rent-geared-to-income basis. Second, the government housing agency, the Toronto Community Housing Corporation,[3] has final approval over the cooperative's operating and capital budgets, thereby limiting the actual amount of control the members have in a vital area of decision-making. Third, the cooperative must provide a series of reports to Toronto Community Housing, demonstrating their capacity to properly manage the property. Despite these differences, there are also enough similarities to other housing cooperatives that the Atkinson Co-operative is considered to be a housing cooperative. In the next sections I describe three areas that demonstrate this

[1] Although the housing agency had maintained that no funds would be available, they provided token resources at the latter stages of the conversion process, which added to the effectiveness of the different activities.

[2] Those residents who have chosen not to become members remain in the community as tenants of the cooperative and will be protected under government legislation referred to as the *Tenant Protection Act.*

[3] As of 2001, the Ontario government downloaded housing to the municipalities. There have been three different government housing agencies in Toronto, Metro Toronto Housing Authority, Metro Toronto Housing Corporation, and Toronto Community Housing. The current agency in the municipality of Toronto is the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC), with oversees the agreement with the Atkinson Housing Co-operative.

hybrid arrangement: the relationship to the government housing agency; member involvement in governance; and developing a cooperative identity.

5.1 Relationship to the Toronto Community Housing Corporation

The original proposal in the conversion business plan was to lease the property from the government (Atkinson Housing Co-operative, 1996). However, an operating agreement was considered more appropriate since it was the best way to account for different stakeholder interests in the conversion and in support of the community (Sousa, 2013). The operating agreement was created according to four principles: first, the community needs to have a resource group (e.g., Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto) with which it associates itself, thereby providing the community with credibility. The motive behind this first principle was the recognition that public housing residents may not immediately be capable of operating a housing property, and the expertise of the resource group ensures that Atkinson Co-operative operates in an accountable and transparent fashion.

The second principle establishes the rent maximums, or the rent cap, paid by members whose level of income allows them to pay closer to market rent. Since the completion of the conversion The Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) establishes the rent cap, and it still retains control of that responsibility. Since the Atkinson Co-operative cannot establish the rent cap, a key motivator of community building— that is setting rents—is beyond the control of the community. It is still too early to ascertain the impact of this principle, but given past practices in public housing, when the rent cap matches market levels residents prefer to leave the community to rent in the private sector, thereby ensuring that members may not be financially motivated to remain in the community. The third principle is that new tenants come from an existing centralized waiting list, and they are required to become a member of the Atkinson Housing Co-operative. Using a centralized waiting list is the standard for all government assisted housing properties in Ontario, including cooperatives and non-profits. The challenge with the implementation of this principle is that the cooperative cannot determine the potential of future members to support the community's development.

The fourth principle specifies that the operating budget is to be negotiated with TCHC on an annual basis. The Atkinson operating budget makes a distinction between operating and fixed costs. Operating costs, for example, on staffing and on maintenance, are controlled by the cooperative. However, the fixed costs (i.e., realty taxes and utilities) are beyond the control of the cooperative. The process of creating and approving the budget is similar to that of other housing cooperatives and involves the finance committee working with property management to establish a draft budget that goes to the Atkinson board of directors and then to the membership for final approval. But unlike other housing cooperatives, Atkinson must obtain approval for the budget from TCHC.

Once approved, the cooperative makes a monthly payment to TCHC to pay the fixed costs. While this extra step is an added burden, all housing cooperatives in Ontario who receive government subsidies for rents must submit their budget to their municipal housing agency. However, in the case of Atkinson, the TCHC has the power to reject the budget while other cooperatives submit their budgets to ensure that the subsidies are used to pay the housing charges. This is an important distinction and reflects a lack of confidence on the part of government in self-management by public housing residents.

The operating agreement also clarifies the sources of revenue that Atkinson Co-operative can access. The Atkinson Housing Co-operative has access to the same sources of revenue as other cooperatives, but because Atkinson's members are all low-income and have their rent adjusted to their income, revenue from the housing charges can vary from month to month. In this regard, Atkinson differs from other housing cooperatives where there is, unlike at Atkinson, normally an income mix and the revenues tend to be more stable since they come from three sources: housing charges, rent subsidies for members with low incomes, and small fees associated with parking and laundry. Nevertheless, the expectation is that Atkinson Co-operative will meet monthly revenue benchmarks set by the provincial Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

It is common practice for housing cooperatives to have a capital reserve fund for rehabilitation and maintenance work on the property. The fund is replenished annually from four sources of revenue: the housing charges, a government bridge subsidy, any operating surplus, and miscellaneous sources of revenue. Atkinson Co-operative, on the other hand, operates like other public housing projects in that there is no capital reserve and the TCHC establishes and funds the capital priorities given that Atkinson is a public asset[4]**.** Not having a reserve fund limits their ability to make improvements deemed necessary by the residents. The Atkinson property is over 30 years old and requires a significant amount of repairs, but the new organization is expected to maintain and to maximize the existing life expectancy of the property. According to Sousa (2013) the main reason that Atkinson cannot have a reserve fund is because it is still within the government's public housing portfolio. Allowing Atkinson to have its own reserve fund was deemed to be inequitable when considered across all public housing projects. In order to fund major capital improvements, Atkinson members are strongly encouraged to take part in participatory budgeting practices organized by TCHC. As a relatively recent innovation in the Canadian context, participatory budgeting allows for the input of tenants in public housing into establishing TCHC's budgeting priorities (Foroughi and McCollum, 2013). In effect, participating in the participatory budgeting is in addition to the process that the cooperative has for creating its own budget, which is not an expectation for other housing cooperatives. Capital expenditures have been an ongoing challenge for the community because

[4] There is one additional source of revenue for Atkinson in lieu of a capital reserve fund. Atkinson can retain a portion of the surplus funds from the operating budget in the community to be used for capital repairs. To date there has been no budget surplus.

it must still rely on TCHC to fund capital improvements, who in turn must consider the dire conditions facing a long neglected public housing system.

A concern expressed by both the residents and the government representatives during the conversion process was whether the board of directors could become familiar with the intricacies of managing a multi-million dollar property. In general, the concern was whether public housing residents could be responsible enough to maintain the property and protect the interests of the residents and of a public asset. Residents of public housing projects do not always have access to non-formal education and training opportunities in how to manage a housing community. Before the conversion to the Atkinson Co-operative, the residents' association was able to run different programs and organize in the community since they had charitable status that allowed them to raise funds for those initiatives. In fact, the residents' association was able to rely on government agencies, non-profit organizations, and third party funders, such as independent foundations, to provide management training. The funders and local agencies wanted the community to be successful, and they viewed their role as promoting community development and inclusive values. The residents' association has also received invaluable support from other outside resources to establish business systems that are accountable and transparent. However, management training for the Atkinson cooperative was much more difficult to access beyond CHFT. Formally, municipal representatives do not see themselves as directly involved in Atkinson Co-operative.

Over the past ten years the emphasis on education and training has focused on the board of directors and on the membership at large. The operating agreement stipulates that a third party organization will provide education workshops and community development initiatives at Atkinson over an extended period of time. CHFT was formally named as the third party and the costs would be borne from the cooperative operating budget. These education opportunities include: training of board of directors, literacy programs to enable residents to read the cooperative's documents, race relations to help members become more understanding and sensitive to the needs found in a diverse community, and basic to advanced computer training courses. The CHFT has been integral to ensuring that the cooperative board of directors has established proper business practices. These four principles served as guidelines for the final agreement between the Atkinson Housing Co-operative and the City of Toronto, and it can now serve as a template for other public housing projects that wish to convert into a cooperative.

5.2 Member involvement in governance

Like other cooperatives, the members of Atkinson create and implement by-laws that set out the conditions for living and participating in the community's system of governance and the rights and responsibilities of the membership. The process of establishing these by-laws involves the membership through committees and at community meetings. According to a source at the CHFT, two by-laws had to be in place prior to the completion of the conversion. The first was the

organizational by-law (which was approved by the membership in November 1999) that outlines the rules for membership, elections procedures, and evictions, among other things, thereby ensuring that the cooperative has a document outlining an elections process and an accountability structure. Shortly after the organizational by-law was passed an occupancy by-law was developed and passed by the members. The occupancy by-law is similar to a lease in that it outlines the standards under which individual members are able to reside in the cooperative. Other by-laws have since been created by the co-ops different committees, including conflict of interest, spending, maintenance improvement, parking, rent arrears, and rent subsidy by-laws.

While, as I have been describing, there are some differences between Atkinson and most housing cooperatives in Ontario, the system of governance at Atkinson conforms to the norms for other housing cooperatives. The board of directors is the legal authority for the cooperative and is responsible for developing and approving any by-laws or legal agreements. Hence, the board makes all major policy decisions and seeks approval from the general membership. And while the board of directors is elected by the membership, the lack of knowledge and experience of many members has always been a challenge for the board's effective functioning and renewal. At the time of the conversion the CHFT and the board of directors determined that one way to overcome these experience-based and other challenges was to add three non-residents appointed by the board for two-year terms. These individuals were expected to have experience in managing a cooperative housing property. While the membership approved this arrangement and many believed that it added one more layer of accountability, the board decided that they no longer required these external members and concluded with this process in 2005. There was initial concern that removing the external members would result in a loss of crucial independent viewpoints of experienced housing practitioners. Upon review of the financial audits and meeting minutes, however, the property management company has provided the necessary direction and advice to enable to board members to make decisions that are in the best interests of the community.

In addition to a democratically elected board of directors, the community has a strong committee structure that provides opportunities for all members to participate in decision-making. There have, for instance, been committees for maintenance and finance, parking and security, member education, landscaping, and revitalization. The committees have been effective in engaging members of the community in decision-making and in advising the board of directors. For each committee, a board member serves as a liaison thereby ensuring that there is a clear line of communication between the board and the various committees. The board liaison reports on the work by the committee and brings forward its recommendations. The committee's role is formal and, where necessary, the liaison requests a motion or that a letter is written regarding some issue.

Despite numerous challenges and the inexperience of the membership in self-governance, the organizational structure is transparent and accountable and the governance has been relatively effective. Some key indicators of the governance's effectiveness have been: an increase in community consultation, more residents voicing concerns in a constructive manner, and increased awareness of

the role of the committees in the community. As described above, one of the key assets of Alexandra Park, the forerunner to the Atkinson Housing Co-operative, was an established tradition of resident participation. However, the election of the Atkinson board and its related committee structure represented an increased level of responsibility. Under the new management structure the leadership had to be more aware of community issues and become skilled at resolving them.

The membership of the Atkinson Housing Co-operative has been quite stable over time, which is one reason that the community was considered as a prime candidate to become a cooperative (Metro Toronto Housing Corporation, 2001). The cooperative membership is quite diverse and changes in its membership base are representative of the general diversity in public housing in Toronto. While ethno-cultural diversity has always been a characteristic of the neighbourhood in which Atkinson is situated, the ethno-cultural diversity within the cooperative has become more pronounced in recent years. The level of ethno-cultural diversity has created different challenges for the community leadership. For instance, divisions along ethno-cultural and even religious lines have emerged over the years, and they are most noticeable during board elections (Sousa, 2013). One contributing factor to the divisions has been a perceived lack of transparency, where information sent across groups is not always consistent and clear and often provided in a few languages: "*It has a long way to go here. I think we are reaching there [sic]. It's that if we could communicate more to the people that do not speak English. When they sent those flyers, they should print [them] in different languages… Spanish to people who speaks Spanish, so that everybody can communicate with each other and be more active*" (Sarah, personal communication, 25 October 2005).

A persistent challenge, then, has been to deal with the perceived divisions that some base on factors such as race, ethnicity, gender or age. One member who moved into the community in 2005 feels there is an urgent need to deal with ethnic diversity as an issue within the community: "*So far, I just moved here eight months ago. From what I saw, we just, you, me the neighbours, it's very good. You did call to invite us to events. I really really enjoyed it. It's good. And I wish all the people in this block would be so friendly. It may be because their languages are different. Some of them pass and say hello, some of them don't talk. They look like I saw and meet people in the community when I go to the meeting. It's just like everybody is one people*" (Willow, personal communication, 25 October 2005).

According to some residents there has been a notable increase in the representation of single ethno-cultural groups on the board of directors, which has given some residents the impression that particular individual groups are aiming to take greater control of the community. Some fear that such dominance will lead to a perception that some groups are more favoured over others, which is suggested by one member of the cooperative: "*As a board member, shouldn't they say 'Hi, welcome? Can I help you with anything? You need anything?' I do no agree that 80 per cent is one race, 20 per cent is mixed basically with a little of this, a little of that. It should be all diverse. But it's got nothing to do with your nationality. It's got to do with who's voting*" (Sarah, personal communication, 25 October 2005).

While there is a perception of the dominance of certain groups, after researching evidence based on observations and meeting minutes, the election results are simply illustrative of the fact that some ethno-cultural groups are more active in the community than others. There is a lack of evidence, beyond the anecdotal, that any one ethno-cultural group is attempting to gain greater control of the community for their own purpose. Nevertheless, ongoing efforts to increase ethic and language representation on the board of directors have been successful. At the present time the cooperative's board of directors is closer to being representative of the ethno-cultural diversity of the community than ever before.

5.3 Developing a cooperative identity

It is essential when transitioning toward community-based control that the members identify with being part of a collective and relating with one's neighbours by being able to make decisions that reflect a sense of collective responsibility. Undoubtedly, the idiosyncratic nature of the cooperative model presents unique challenges for community developers at Atkinson, but an integral strength of its cooperative form has been to foster a culture based on active engagement and a strong connection to place. However, an ongoing challenge for many involved with the Atkinson Co-operative is to determine whether a cooperative identity has been formed among the broader membership. According to one long-time member: "*When it was public housing, it was like… you don't really know about what was going on. Nothing was kind of about to you; no information was about like to your face. With [the] co-op, they seems like they try to get everybody to be part of it, whereas the other is kind of working solely on their own*" (Ahmed, personal communication, 25 November 2006).

Others do not really see the difference in becoming a cooperative: "*It doesn't look like co-ops. From what I have seen coops look like... This looks like project housing to me. I haven't seen no changes except for the name; that's the only differences: before it was natural housing, now it's a co-op*" (Gary, personal communication, 25 November 2006).

It is important to understand whether and how the members are experiencing the changes. Some individual members reveal some confusion of what it actually means to live in a cooperative. Part of the confusion can be attributed to growing pains, which can be part of establishing a cooperative identity. Some members have expressed concern that there is an absence of visible improvements in how the community is being managed. Realistically, the changes are not always immediately visible. The outcome of the decision-making process can take a long time to see because years of neglect have forced the members to take control of a situation that requires learning new skills and making priorities that at times does not directly involve community building.

Indeed there have been ongoing efforts to demonstrate the efficacy of local decision-making in the cooperative. For instance, the annual election of the board of directors provide member with an opportunity to understand board governance and how the directors serve as stewards of the community and must work with the government housing agency to develop rules that serve both

interests. All positions are contested annually and new people are elected while others are reelected. People are not always happy with the result but it is nevertheless democracy in action. When asked about the leadership, one cooperative resource person stated: "*It's just that the only thing is that we don't really see their achievement. We ask people to come and tell us about their concerns and they are listened to. I knew that in this neighbourhood we have a lot of different talents, say, people who are good at sewing, people who are good at painting, so if we can be involved in that and maybe work together, we can even make a lot of better changes for sure*" (Sarah, personal communication, 25 October 2005).

The active committee structure is another place where the broader membership can be involved in decision-making, an option that was not available under government management. The social committee holds a variety of events that bring people together and some members want to see more involvement in them from the broader membership. According to one member: "*Another thing that I truly believe is that if you want to live in Atkinson co-op, a question should be on that lease. What committee do you want to belong to? In other co-ops, every member who lives there is supposed to put extra amount of volunteer hours and if you do that, everybody gets together, we could do fund raising, we can get [a] new central bill, we can get programs for our kids*" (Elliot, personal communication, 26 July 2006).

One particular committee, which has proven to be vital, is the security committee. They work with local police to develop feasible solutions to ongoing criminal activity. For example, the installation of new security cameras resulted in reduced drug dealing. However, there is a recognition of limits to outside interventions and that solutions must come from within the Atkinson community but with some outside assistance, as well. As described by one member: "*A lot of people say that in neighbourhoods like this, there should be cops sitting right in the middle to make sure that everything goes smooth. But no, it has nothing to do with the cops. Honestly, I don't think cops make anything better. It takes each and every one of the people here to make things better. If they all come collectively, they will come up with something. I see meetings being held in the little community centre right there. I see the older people trying to do something. Maybe some young guys try to do something different, try to make a better place to live. But unfortunately, it doesn't just take people from here, because financially, you don't have the resources. Therefore, we need the government stepping in, helping us out, giving us a hand from this type of situation*" (Sarah, personal communication, 25 October 2005).

Overall, the tradition of individuals caring about the community has, over the years, become entrenched at Atkinson. Regardless of any differences, it has been observed that members care and are willing to do what it takes to make the community successful. One relatively new member who moved in 2005 remarks with the following: "*I don't think we are fully functioning properly. We have a lot of potential. This is our first step. This is our great challenge…. Unfortunately if we fail to run the co-op, it means our doors are closed. Legally you have made [a] paper establishment. Now how do you execute, implement this establishment. If we fail, it would be their loss. It means you failed. We have to fight and combine the community. And I think other point of view is better for the progress. If somebody has other point of view, other than your point of view, it means it's improving*" (Elliot, personal communication, 26 July 2006).

There is, thus, a broad recognition among many at Atkinson that they have the power to make the community healthy and strong. The members want to live in a safer community and—by being a cooperative—many of them feel it is possible. Informally, individual members are exploring innovative ways to improve the community. However, this is in tension with some members who feel that there should be more obvious indications that the property is now a cooperative: "*That's the thing. We are still dealing with the same issues. Nothing's changed. We are not a community. It depends on where you live. Ok, we are friends; everyone sticks together, but the whole place itself, we are not a co-op. We are far from it. We live in a project. They do have an understanding what a co-op is, even then they have no sense about what a co-op is supposed to look like and doing. We are co-op? Sure doesn't feel like a co-op because it looks like a co-op. People don't like the co-op because it's a project, and that's the sadness of it*" (Elliot, personal communication, 26 July 2006).

As a response to these tensions, the Toronto Community Housing Corporation stepped in. Derek Ballentyne, the corporation's former chief executive officer, describes Atkinson's potential influence on TCHC's efforts to improve the public housing stock: "*Atkinson was really an interesting model for us because before we were prepared to really think about self-management models Atkinson was an opportunity to actually do something. And the community has been working hard. There has been a good community capacity to take on those responsibilities. So in a sense it was a great opportunity as a test case of what can happen*" (personal communication, 26 February 2004).

As expressed by Ballentyne, the Atkinson conversion departed from approaches taken by previous housing authorities by expressing a commitment to community building strategies intended to result in healthier public housing projects. Furthermore, he suggests that despite its challenges and tensions, Atkinson will influence the development of future strategies when the goal is some form of community-based control, and becoming a cooperative is one approach.

Although Atkinson had strong external support, it was limited to the level of policy. Before and after the conversion process ended, there has been a dearth of resources provided for capital repairs and capacity building activities. As a result, too much reliance was placed on the expectation that resident volunteers would be able to simultaneously operate a multi-million dollar corporation and develop a sense of community, which has, as I have been documenting, come with some challenges.

Should it, then, be surprising that public housing residents were ultimately able to accomplish this conversion? Should it be surprising that public housing residents are so committed to managing their community and that they can learn the necessary skills to do so? According to David Miller, former mayor of the City of Toronto, government support and local control are not mutually exclusive. Converting into a cooperative—according to Miller—can begin to dispel many of the myths associated with living in public housing. "*People who live in public housing live there for affordability issues. They need money, but just because you are poor [it] doesn't mean you don't have the same ability, values and strengths as people who could afford their own apartments or houses. So I think one of the successes by Atkinson and one of the reasons that we have co-ops is because it engages people's strengths. People want to have a real say over whether their lives are affected*" (David Miller, personal communication, 16 May 2005).

As evidenced in the words of Atkinson's community members in the previous pages, instilling a cooperative identity will take time, yet it is also clear that the residents of Atkinson desire to live in a community that they can be proud of, where inclusiveness is the practice rather than an ideal. There is still work to be done, but the sentiment expressed by the members of Atkinson is that solutions begin with their involvement, which was not an option when it was a government housing project.

The road to becoming a cooperative took over ten years and along the way it was vital for people to feel they belonged to a cohesive community and that their participation could result in something meaningful. It is too early to determine how successful the new cooperative has been. The key to evaluating Atkinson's success rests with recognizing that its members have demonstrated some of the seven cooperative principles shared across the cooperative movement[5]. The roots are without doubt in place and we will, 15 years after it become a cooperative, most likely continue to see the development of a healthier and safer community that is democratic and inclusive.

6. Looking ahead

The primary purpose of the transition of the Alexandra Park housing project into a cooperative was to give the residents an opportunity develop and implement local solutions to complex social problems in a democratic and sustainable way. The Atkinson Housing Co-operative represents an innovative response to calls by residents and housing activists to improve public housing through cooperation. A community development perspective was central to the completion of the conversion process and to ongoing efforts to manage a complex organization. Converting into a cooperative was the preferred route for the Atkinson community. But it has since also been realized that the responsibilities that come with being a cooperative are not always easy and that it will take time and commitment to witness the realization of a healthier community.

There is much hope and praise for the Atkinson Co-operative and many communities will learn from the experience. Atkinson exemplifies that solutions to improving public housing are possible when applying a community development approach that reflects a community's assets as the basis to implement local initiatives. The members themselves have taken on a task that requires a commitment to learning new skills, and the Atkinson experience has shown that there is no shortage of human and social capital to contribute to the success of the new entity. There is, moreover, a strong belief within and outside the community that Atkinson will prevail collectively. Elliott, the member of the co-op who joined in 2005, offers us the following final hopeful statement: "*The whole community, everybody gets together as a community. It doesn't matter what kind of obstacles are showing up in your way, if you stand together as a community you can move those obstacles. Like they say, you can move that mountain. And if you stand together as a community, work together as a community,*

[5] See International Co-operative Alliance (2015).

work with everything you have, the board, committees, TCHC, if you work with all these organizations, you can move that mountain. There is nothing that you cannot move in this community" (personal communication, 19 April 2006).

As a cooperative the members have the social and structural means to ensure that change is possible and sustainable; that is, change can happen through actions developed collectively and in solidarity. In essence, the Atkinson case is a clear example of how community development practices are integral to realizing the cooperative advantage.

By becoming a cooperative the members of Atkinson have benefited from greater control over the decision-making process by developing and implementing policies that directly benefit individual families and the health of their community. An important final question is whether this experiment can be replicated to other public housing properties? I do believe it is possible to take what was experienced at Atkinson into other communities. The Atkinson experience also offers an opportunity to revisit how a public service can best serve a community through local control over decision-making. However, a bottom-up community development approach should not take on prescriptive strategies. Rather, methods and tactics for community development must adapt to a particular community context. What is transferable is the lesson that development practices must support an individual's agency, and also foster a sense of solidarity across groups and individuals.

I conclude this article on a personal note. As a former resident, it has been a privilege to document and interpret the transformation of my community in this paper and in other publications. I will always have fond memories of the exciting and frustrating work that went into creating the Atkinson Housing Co-operative. It is my hope that other communities can learn from the Atkinson experience by being aware of the challenges and appreciating the potential for living in a healthier community through attaining community-based control.

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