LOW COST HOUSING: A PLACE OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION FOR IMMIGRANTS?

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THE OMHM: AN OVERVIEW

- The Office municipal d'habitation de Montreal (OMHM) [Montreal municipal housing office] manages 29,725 public housing units::
  - 20,567 low cost housing units, just over half of which are offered to families and individuals under 60 years of age, the other half of which are reserved for people aged 60 and over
  - 1,608 affordable housing units
  - 7550 private market units with subsidized rent
- In all, 50,000 tenants live in these units.
- Approximately 23,000 households are on the waiting list for low cost housing. Most of them are families (close to 17,000 as of December 31, 2009).
- In 2006, the estimated average income of households with children was $24,800 including family allowances and 14,736$ without them (compared with $74,641 before taxes for metro families).
- In low cost housing units for families with at least one child, 52% are single parent families, and of those, 65% have an annual income under $10,000.

This year, the OMHM is celebrating its 41st anniversary. Since the organization's inception, the reality of Montreal's low cost housing population has changed significantly.

Over the years and with the amendments made to the rules for allocating public housing, the portrait of low cost housing tenants has changed considerably. Originally Quebecois and poor, but including some low income workers, this population is now increasingly poor, made up predominantly of single parent families and, like today's Montreal, culturally diverse. The lack of sound, affordable housing on the private market, particularly for large families; the discrimination that continues with regard to access to housing; the lack of awareness about the private rental housing stock; and the low vacancy rate in Montreal, which, despite recent improvements, remains low for less expensive housing, all contribute to the high demand for low cost housing for immigrant families. In order to be eligible for low cost housing, Quebec residents must have permanent resident status or must be Canadian citizens. According to current estimates, 66% of families living in low cost housing are of non Canadian origin.[1]

These changes have posed a number of challenges for the OMHM. Issues stemming from having different cultures living side by side have been central to community development efforts for over 20 years. Also, management practices have had to be adapted and employees trained. As we will see further on, these challenges remain, despite the progress made.

For the purposes of this article, we will discuss the issues more specifically related to the reception and integration of immigrant families.

LIVING IN LOW COST HOUSING

Living in low cost housing means rubbing shoulders every day with people of diverse backgrounds whose common tie is financial difficulty. Whether a person is an immigrant or not, life in low cost housing entails particular challenges.

Annick Germain and Xavier Leloup have described this clearly in their recent study:

> [translation]
> Tenants of low cost housing are, in a way, forced into an alien environment—they have not truly chosen this type of housing, let alone chosen their neighbours. There is a high concentration of unstable people (and not just financially unstable); the environment is highly stig-

> matized; … and it is an environment owned by an anonymous "Other"—in this case, the government rather than a real, live landlord.[2]

The proximity of others is a reality specific to family housing developments. In architectural terms, the OMHM has many types of constructions available for families: small houses, infill units, and units in high density housing developments of 60 to 500 units. Germain and Leloup's study shows that the concentration of social problems, the physical configuration of the buildings, the presence of common areas (which provide both opportunities for building bridges and opportunities for clashes), and the physical and "social" dissociation from the surrounding neighbourhood all contribute to the specific nature of these living environments.

It is important to put this reality of living together into context, because it influences and complicates the integration of immigrants into these environments. We will provide details on this further on.

Nevertheless, the concentration of residents in public housing developments makes it possible to find enough citizens there to be able to develop community strategies that promote the empowerment of people and the development of local communities.

PORTRAIT OF IMMIGRANT FAMILIES IN LOW COST HOUSING IN MONTREAL

In October 2005, close to 31,000 people in lived in OMHM low cost family housing—about 7,200 women, 2,800 men and nearly 21,000 children. According to the tenant profile developed by Xavier Leloup, the average number of children per family, for all origins, was 2.78, and the breakdown of origins was as follows:

- Canada: 33.9%
- Caribbean: 26.3%
- Maghreb and Middle East: 12.3%
- Latin America: 11.8%
- Sub Saharan Africa: 7.8%
- Asia: 4.3%
- Eastern Europe: 2.3%
- Western Europe: 1.1%

The author stresses the particular challenges that workers in the housing sector experience in welcoming newcomers of foreign backgrounds:

> [translation]
> Newcomers' lack of knowledge of the rules in this sector is one of the most significant [challenges]. It is the same for the norms and behaviours relating to the use of housing, which are often influenced by social and cultural factors …. In addition, the diversity of immigration sometimes makes communication with newcomers difficult.[3]

While inter ethnic cohabitation is considered a social asset in other environments, it is viewed far less positively in environments where living together is already difficult. Thanks to the support of institutional and community partners, we have been able to develop some projects that bring people together. The problems go beyond the OMHM's mandate, however, and more intervention must take place in different family complexes in order to avoid ghettoization. For instance, the presence, in certain pockets of housing, of youth gangs that are sometimes criminal and sometimes identified with ethnic groups leads to the stigmatization of residents, as well as to problems of insecurity, delinquency, etc.

STRATEGIES DEVELOPED OVER THE YEARS

For that reason, the OMHM has been working on a social development strategy for more than 20 years. The purpose of the strategy is to improve tenants' quality of life by promoting social and community development in low cost housing in Montreal, primarily by partnering with the OMHM's services and with other social development players on the island of Montreal, particularly community organizations, to improve tenants' environments and by developing a sense of belonging.

The following objectives underpin this partnership and work:

- help empower tenants by supporting their initiatives or by promoting their civic and/or community involvement
- break the isolation of vulnerable and/or socially excluded individuals
- offer activities and/or services to meet the needs of the community (for example, employment, homework programs for children, and collective and community kitchen activities)
- promote better cohabitation between residents (intergenerational, intercultural)
- create communities by building relationships that foster a sense of belonging

Currently, there are some 150 community based projects in OMHM housing and close to 125 tenant groups (seniors and families). For eight years, the OMHM has been supporting tenant consultation forums, at both the regional and local levels.

Participation in consultation forums and in community activities remains a challenge for immigrant families. That is why, for several years, increased efforts have been made to support the social integration of these families and at the same time, specific projects have been developed to build bridges between housing and community, and between community and neighbourhood.

HABITER LA MIXITÉ

The intercultural and integration project "Habiter la mixité" began about 10 years ago thanks to the support of the City of Montreal and the Quebec department of immigration and cultural communities.

Its successes include making learning French accessible in low cost housing, building bridges between isolated immigrant tenants and their neighbourhood resources, and supporting social integration in the community.

Essentially, the project grew out of the conclusions of a study by Francine Dansereau and Anne Marie Séguin on intercultural living in low cost housing in Montreal.[4] The study highlighted, as dœs Xavier Leloup's aforementioned study, that the lack of awareness of the rules of daily life in low cost housing can contribute to reinforcing prejudices and discrimination.

The project centres on providing a personalized welcome for newcomers to low cost housing. A representative makes contact with the families, often through the mother, who finds herself in a new environment, unaware of her rights and responsibilities with respect to housing, dœs not know the neighbourhood resources and often feels isolated. These women speak little or no French. The aim of this contact is to create a relationship of trust. It can take weeks or even months to establish, and meetings with the husband may be necessary. Once the relationship is established, the representative takes the tenant to participate in community activities organized by and for low cost housing tenants. These activities may include apple picking, flower planting, and working on community gardens. Often, it is through activities for young children that we meet parents.

In 2004, INRS researchers assessed this immigrant welcome and support project.[5] Their research confirmed the success of a personalized approach and the establishment of a relationship of trust, and it highlighted the importance of programming that meets participants' needs. The study found that, as a result of the role played by the representative or facilitator, the project supported the orientation of immigrants and directed them to resources in the area.

Since then, the project has evolved and now has three parts: supporting families, bringing different cultures closer together in low cost housing for seniors, and promoting youth participation in the community. One initiative that has just been launched is an intergenerational newsletter for tenants of low cost housing.

OTHER COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

A few years ago, one of the main areas with a Francophone majority was the site of xenophobic incidents targeting new low cost housing tenants from South Asian countries. These incidents led to the creation of the Table de concertation en relations interculturelles [roundtable on intercultural relations], made up of several community organizations (including the OMHM) that have decided to join forces to provide the community with a resource to guide groups through the process of transforming some of their practices—an essential aspect of adapting to the changes in a neighbourhood's cultural profile.

A new project has just started thanks to the support of the Conférence régionale des élus de Montreal [regional conference of elected officials of Montreal]. This project aims to assist, for a period of three years, the process of social integration of 30 immigrant women living in low cost housing. Based on needs and interests that they have identified, the women are supported in the organization of thematic activities and in the creation of an informal network of trading services, such as child care, group purchasing, community kitchen groups and—why not?—small business development such as a catering service.

It would be impossible to list all of the success stories in different low cost housing environments over the last 20 years. These successes were made possible through the combined efforts of local communities and through the opportunities offered by financial supporters. The OMHM has chosen to be an enabler in its facilities, and it would not have been able to achieve these results without the cooperation of community stakeholders.

MANAGEMENT OF THE OMHM

The ethno cultural diversity of the OMHM's tenants creates a number of challenges, particularly in terms of the adaptation of communications with clients, who sometimes speak neither French nor English. Some documents are translated, and interpreters are used, but other methods of communication remain to be explored.

For three years, the OMHM has provided its employees with training in order to give them the tools they need to build a relationship of trust with immigrants, to foster their cooperation and to set limits without appearing to challenge people's values.

In addition, the OMHM has developed an action plan on respect in order to counter all forms of discrimination.

CONCLUSION

Much has been done and much remains to be done, but clearly, public housing can be a tool for fostering the social integration of immigrants.

Nothing is automatic, however. To achieve results, we must provide support that enables individuals to take control of their own lives and to participate in community life in their neighbourhood, and support that builds bridges that can help foster inclusion in society.

Major challenges remain: the sustainability of actions taken; achieving a sense of harmony among people from different cultures and different generations who live together in one community; and the ever present discrimination, particularly toward visible minorities.

NOTES

[1] Leloup, Xavier, "Loger les familles avec enfants dans le logement social Montrealais: politique d'attribution et profil sociodémographique des residents," Centre Urbanisation Culture Société, INRS, Montreal, 2009, 133 p.

[2] Germain, Annick, and Leloup, Xavier, "Il était une fois dans un HLM," Montreal, INRS Urbanisation, Culture et Société, 2006, 121 p.

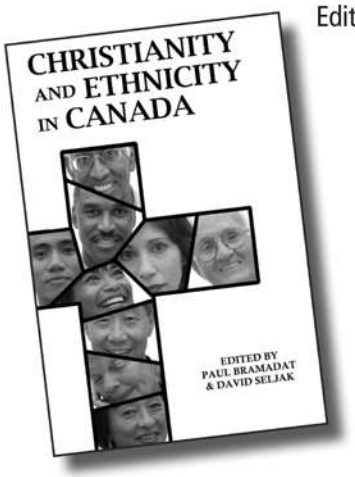
[3] Leloup, Xavier, "Loger les familles avec enfants dans le logement social Montrealais: politique d'attribution et profil sociodémographique des residents" (forthcoming).

[4] Dansereau, Francine, and Séguin, Anne Marie, "La cohabitation inter ethnique dans le logement social au Québec," INRS Urbanisation, 1995, 305pp.

[5] Bernèche, Francine, edited by Francine Dansereau and Annick Germain, "L'accueil et l'accompagnement des immigrants récemment installés en HLM dans des quartiers Montrealais: l'expérience du projet Habiter la mixité," Montreal, INRS Urbanisation, Culture et société, 2004.

CHRISTIANITY AND ETHNICITY IN CANADA

Edited by Paul Bramadat and David Seljak



Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada analyzes in detail the role of religion in ethnic communities and the role of ethnicity in religious communities. The contributors discuss how changes in ethnic composition of these traditions influence religious practice and identity as well as how religious traditions influence communal and individual ethnic identities.

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