
New Neighbours: A Case Study of Cooperative Housing

Matthew Cooper and Margaret Critchlow Rodman

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New Neighbours is an ethnography of two housing co-operatives in Harbourfront in Toronto, but it is also more than that. It explores the conflict between use values and exchange values in the construction of Canadian housing, and argues for the relevance of housing co-operatives in improving the quality of urban life by allowing citizens to take "greater control over the conditions that affect their own lives" (p. 4). Given that Canadian co-operatives have fallen upon politically hard times (discussed in a useful background chapter), such an argument is particularly timely.

The authors argue that giving citizens "more control over the conditions that affect their lives would improve the quality of urban life" (p. 268). They find the advantages of co-operatives not simply to be the provision of more affordable housing, but also the encouragement of participatory democracy and of the diversity necessary to meet the needs of housing people in a nation like Canada.

Perhaps the greatest merit of this book is that it makes these arguments not simply through theoretical argument or through examination of statistics, but through intensive fieldwork in the co-operatives. Such research is distressingly rare in studies of North American housing, and the insights liberally scattered throughout this book indicate the advantages of looking in detail at what actually happens and not just what people say about it.

The authors argue that co-operative housing is much more effective at providing the use values that are sought in housing, not just for those who cannot afford private housing, but also for many of those who could afford to buy their own dwelling. They argue that much of our present housing fails to "meet the needs of a diverse and rapidly changing population," and that "an explicit recognition of the primacy of use values over exchange values in housing will best ensure that these needs are met" (p. 9). The only reservation that I have about this useful and timely book concerns this point. The social construction of further housing co-operatives is powerfully constrained by the dominance of exchange values in capitalist societies and the reliance of this housing form upon the political will to subsidize it. The authors say little about how this housing sector might be further expanded, given the lack of political support in Canada at this time. Yet, if this non-profit housing form provides desirable, efficient housing provision that responds to unmet needs, could its provision not also be accomplished without relying upon fickle governmental support?

This book will be very useful for those interested in housing, urban anthropology, the social construction of communities and urban development. It is written clearly and concisely enough that it could also be used as a textbook for senior undergraduate courses.