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## Book Review

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**Building a Co-operative Community in Public Housing: The Case of the Atkinson Housing Co-operative.** By Jorge Sousa. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2013. 272 pp. ISBN 9780802038036.

In 1973, amendments were made to the National Housing Act that encouraged collaboration between the Canadian government and nonprofit organizations in the housing sector. More recently, in the face of dwindling government support for public and social housing and an increasing demand for affordable accommodations, the role of the social economy in this sector has come to the fore. Increasingly, co-operative organizations have been recognized as an integral part of the social economy, while groups of residents in public or private housing have, in some cases, made arrangements to assume co-ownership of the properties in which they reside.

An illustrative example of this emerging phenomenon is the conversion of the Alexandra Park public housing project in downtown Toronto into the Atkinson Housing Co-operative. Jorge Sousa has diligently captured this transition in *Building a Co-operative Community in Public Housing: The Case of the Atkinson Housing Co-operative*. The aim of this book, as Sousa explains clearly, is practical: to describe the establishment of the Atkinson Housing Co-operative through an ethnographic lens in order to draw out insights gained in the conversion process. In doing so, Sousa hopes to explain how this case—the first of its kind in Canada—unfolded. He also aims to establish a framework that may be employed to assist other communities in similar circumstances; it is referred to as the Framework for Community-Based Control.

The author convincingly argues that the set of principles and policies that govern the work of public housing—which consistently place little faith in the capacity of the residents themselves and aim to cut as many costs as possible—are disempowering for the local population and subvert the processes of community building. As a former resident who was involved in the conversion of Alexandra Park, Sousa explicitly states his belief in the positive ramifications of increasing tenant control over decision-making within public housing.

Sousa adapts and synthesizes several community development models and key elements of diverse bodies of academic literature, such as political sociology and co-operative studies, to construct a theoretical lens with which to interpret pivotal events surrounding the conversion. The integration of various theories to describe a complex phenomenon is a clear strength of the book, as is the ability to identify and analyze critical elements that explain the conversion process without getting lost in the details.



The two central chapters, which provide an overview of some three decades of the history of Alexandra Park, capture key events linked to the conversion process, as well as the ambiguities that surrounded it. The reader learns, for instance, how Sonny Atkinson, after whom the co-operative was named, rallied the community to tackle the drug problems and security issues that the housing authority seemed to be doing little about. His methods were, however, considered controversial by some. When Atkinson learned of the possibility of converting the housing project into a co-operative, he orchestrated a new focus in the struggle against the housing authority. The outcome, which was finally established in 2003, was a hybrid between the co-operative and public housing models. Generally speaking, the narrative is fairly presented, and challenges are given due attention.

The lessons learned are then synthesized and coherently presented. Drawing from its theoretical lens, the book elaborates on the Framework for Community-Based Control and its five components: community assets, building capacity, demonstrating capacity, critical consciousness, and goal attainment. Outlining this framework is one of the goals of the book, and it is compelling because it adapts the existing body of knowledge related to community development in light of lived experience.

Sousa welcomes a wide audience and intends to influence community developers, public housing residents, and policymakers interested in community-based control in the vital area of housing. Both practitioners and academics will find the example of transforming a community outside of government control useful, in relation to both similar types of conversions as well as others, such as business successions or worker co-operatives. Students will appreciate the book's structure and flow, with its clearly defined objectives, well-written chapters, and clear logic. Its content could complement the reading list of a number of undergraduate and graduate level courses in, for instance, community organizing, social movements, alternative economic arrangements, social economy studies, social research methods, public policy of social housing, or public policy of alternative housing models. The documentation, analysis, and interpretation of this community's journey provide a particularly rich contribution to the Canadian Community Economic Development (CED) network, as it continues to learn how to create vibrant and sustainable local economies.

While Sousa's case study provides insights into the dynamics of Canadian housing communities, it does, however, leave the reader with a number of deeper questions that could have been more explicitly explored. Although the book focuses on issues of power and decision-making, these are not the only relevant aspects of community life that must be addressed to foster co-operative living. For example, as Sousa himself makes clear, if latent tensions among residents from different religious and ethnic backgrounds are not adequately addressed, the conversion process can be significantly derailed. One wonders, for instance, how the diversity of the members of a community can contribute to, rather than hamper, its unity of purpose, vision, and action. Given the fact that heterogeneous communities within urban centres are increasingly becoming the norm in Canada, it would have been interesting for Sousa to add a discussion of such questions to his analysis.

Despite these minor limitations, Sousa manages to capture the magnitude of change that occurred at the Atkinson Housing Co-operative without overstating its achievements, as management change alone could not have addressed a number of the systemic social ills facing the community. Having collaborated with this community to learn how to empower its adolescents, Wordswell Association for Community Learning has seen that the residents' commitment to tenant involvement and to the beautification of their community is great. Their story provides hope that communities can be empowered to take greater ownership of their development, and that the limitations of public housing can be challenged and overcome.

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