

The Future of Public Housing

A dialogue with local and international stakeholders

The Crisis in Housing Affordability

We are facing seemingly intractable housing challenges in the Lower Mainland. Housing prices (and rents) have risen astronomically, while incomes have stagnated. Public housing options (including social and co-op housing) for lower-income Canadians are becoming less available with the retraction in public housing spending by senior governments. The gap between housing prices and incomes continues to grow.

Within this context, researchers from the School of Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia brought together leaders from the housing sector for a 4-hour dialogue, "The Futures of Public Housing".

Two key questions were asked:

If we drop the dominant narratives of a likely bleak future, what can we imagine as the possible futures for public housing?

Are some paths into the future more desirable than others? If so, how can we influence decision-makers to steer into these desirable directions?



Transformative Scenario Planning

Transformative Scenario Planning is an approach that encourages diverse stakeholder groups to come together in imagining future scenarios. This method allows for the construction and exploration of different possible futures, making it easier for participants to imagine what the future might hold, while also seeing how they play a role in influencing it.

This approach is useful in complex situations where community members need to become unstuck. As a tool, it can help community members connect better, align their goals and missions, and become more informed about local issues and perspectives.



Conversations in Making the System Visible

Participants were invited to take part in small group discussions over these two questions:

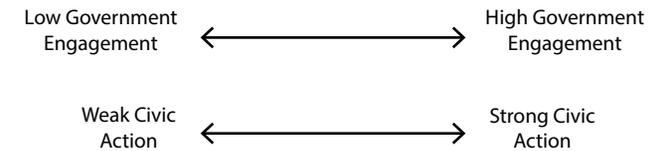
What is most troubling and most promising about the current state of public housing?

What are the biggest drivers of change - the uncertainties that will have the most impact on the future of the sector?

Through plenary discussion, the group identified the two biggest drivers of change:

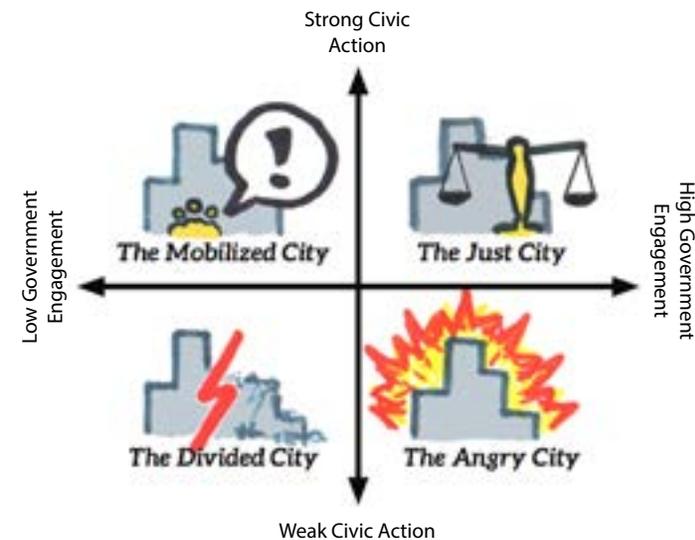
Government Engagement: To what extent will all levels of government intervene with the housing system?

Civic action: To what extent will civil society organizations and the general public support the housing system?



Describing Possible Futures with Scenarios:

By crossing the two biggest drivers of change, participants discussed and envisioned the possible futures for public housing. Four vastly different scenarios arose.



The Future of Public Housing

Describing Possible Futures with Scenarios

The Mobilized City

In this scenario government engagement is low. Following the withdrawal of government funding for public housing, civil society, non-profits, and the private sector rise to the challenge of providing public housing. Without government support, the responsibility becomes too overwhelming. The housing system reaches a crisis point. A civil uprising leads to the issue of housing becoming an election issue.

The Divided City

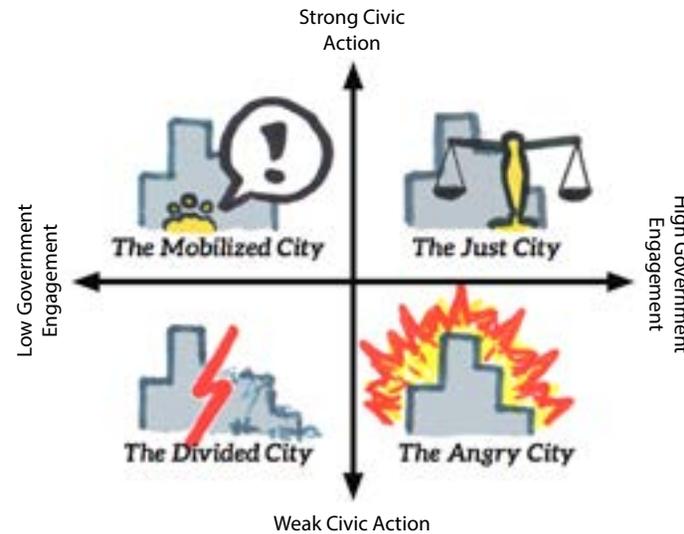
Without government support, civil actors disengage from the public housing system, and other citizens also stop caring. The housing situation declines, leading to isolation and polarization in the community. Those in the middle-class move away, those who are left behind fall deeper into poverty. There is a greater strain on government services, and the economy weakens, leading to a lower quality of life for all.

The Angry City

An engaged government partners with the private sector to fulfill its ambitious housing agenda, but citizens don't support the government's actions. Conflict arises, mistrust of the government grows, and progress is halted. Grass-roots institutions form, but face insurmountable barriers without adequate support.



FUTURE OF PUBLIC
HOUSING PROJECT



The Just City

The community has come together in articulating the need for housing. The government responds to the community's demands for better housing by acknowledging that housing should be a right. A National Housing Strategy is written, and a nation-wide inquiry on housing issues leads to financial support for housing programs. Local governments advocate for raising of the minimum wage, and senior governments respond with higher wages. Public-private partnerships are nurtured, leading to innovative financing for public housing, and improved supports for housing providers. Academics work alongside non-profits in creating stronger public policies in the area of housing. Best practice models are developed and followed, ensuring housing as a right, and affordable housing for all.



What are our Next Steps?

Keep the Discussion Alive

Participants were asked to take the scenarios back to their organizations to keep the discussions alive.

Which is the scenario we want, and how do we get there? If our actual future ends up as a scenario we didn't want, how can we adapt and still thrive?

Find Ways to Work Together to Influence the Discourse on Public Housing

Collaboration and partnerships will be crucial in continuing to influence the discourse on public housing. Keep your doors and minds open as you continue to move forward. Remember your allies.

The Futures of Public Housing dialogue was held as part of a series of events that ran from May 20-23, 2015. The Future of Public Housing project aims to stimulate debate around possible futures for public housing, and the roles and responsibilities of governments in the delivery of housing. This project is led by Dr. Penny Gurstein at the School of Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia.