

The Resilience of the Co-operative Housing Model

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A central feature of the co-operative model is its adaptability to the needs of specific groups that have been disadvantaged by a market-based economy. In this article we discuss the recent conversion of a public housing project in Canada, Alexandra Park, into a housing co-operative, Atkinson Housing Co-operative as a case in point of the resilience of the co-operative housing model. The new co-operative balances residents' need to have greater control with the government's legal responsibility of maintaining a public asset. This is accomplished by utilising a partnership model that has resulted in a hybrid organisation which possesses features from both public and co-operative housing.

Introduction

The co-operative organisational form has a significant presence in different economic sectors within Canada. A central feature of the co-operative model is its adaptability to the needs of specific groups that have been disadvantaged by the private market (Coady 1939; MacPherson 1979). At issue was the lack of goods and services that are affordable and available, as well as ensuring that producers have greater input in establishing prices for their products, for example, the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool. Accordingly co-operatives function with a mission that balances social and economic needs.

A recent case in point is the conversion of a public housing project in Toronto, Alexandra Park, into a housing co-operative¹, Atkinson Housing Co-operative. In this article we discuss this conversion that has resulted in a new housing model that possesses qualities from both public housing and co-operative housing.² We also include a discussion of how the hybrid model demonstrates the resilience of the co-operative housing in response to a changing political climate that has reduced government involvement in the social housing system. We end this article with a description of the current status of the Atkinson Housing Co-operative.

Social Housing in Canada

According to Hulchanski (1990), the private sector's inability to provide affordable housing for persons with lower incomes has given rise to an increased role by government, which resulted in the development of Public Housing projects across Canada. Public housing was the original government-funded housing model initiated by the federal government in the 1940s. Public housing was aimed at providing affordable housing to those low-income individuals and families that could not afford to pay private market rents (Dreier and Hulchanski

1993; Rose 1980). By the 1960s, the Canadian government determined that public housing was not feasible because of the high development and maintenance costs (Sewell 1994). Additionally, changes occurred because of the pervasive social problems related to ghettoising large numbers of low-income families (Prince 1998; Rose 1980).

In Canada, the National Housing Act, which is the legislation regulating housing practices, was amended in 1973 to limit the federal government's role in the direct administration and financing of current and future non-market housing properties and encourage the production of other forms of non-profit housing (Van Dyk 1995; Rose 1980). The new forms of housing - co-operatives and non-profit housing - were called social housing and emerged as partnerships between the government and various community-based non-profit and co-operative organisations such as churches, service clubs, seniors' organisations, unions, and ethno-cultural groups, co-operative corporations, and municipal governments (Carter 1997).³

Co-operative housing diverges from public housing in a variety of ways. For instance, until recently, in co-operatives the historical practice has been for the tenant-selection process to be co-ordinated by each co-operative, whereas in public housing the tenants have always been selected from a centralised waiting list within a government housing agency⁴ (Ontario 2000a; Sousa and Quarter 2003a). The members of a co-operative have always had a more defined role in decision making and co-operatives have a greater income mix among residents than public housing. Co-operatives also contrast to public housing in that the members have security of tenure, such that they can live in the community for as long as they wish provided that they adhere to community-established rules or bylaws and pay the community-established housing charge or rents (Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto 2002). In most public

housing projects, the residents are expected to move once they can afford to pay market rates.

During the 1990s the federal and provincial governments in Canada started to disengage themselves from administering social housing, and in 1993, the federal government downloaded the responsibility to the provinces (Carroll and Jones 2000). While some larger provinces, such as Quebec and British Columbia, continued with their housing development programmes, following the 1995 election, the Conservative government in Ontario - the focus of this research - placed a moratorium on building new non-market housing and even cancelled many contracts. The impact and the consequences of Ontario government policies in ending the development of new social housing is well documented (Layton 2000), but the impact of these changes on existing social housing developments are not as evident.

Since 1995, housing policy in Ontario has increasingly focused on private sector solutions to problems related to funding and maintaining affordable housing. For instance, the government has encouraged a greater role for the private sector by providing incentives such as making it easier for landlords to raise rents (the so-called Tenant Protection Act) and to encourage public-private partnerships. The government assumed that the private sector housing developers and landlords would fill any gaps for low-income households requiring affordable housing, something that has not occurred (Statistics Canada 2000). In addition to the incentives, in 1995 the government proposed to withdraw from the social housing sector altogether with the stated intention of selling the existing public housing stock; however, existing federal agreements prevented the provincial government from following through on selling the public housing properties. In response to not being able to sell the public housing stock, the Ontario government introduced new legislation, called the Social Housing Reform Act, which devolved social housing onto 47 reluctant municipalities, effectively absolving the federal and provincial governments from being financially responsible for current and future social housing developments; however, the legislation states that the provincial government maintains ultimate regulatory control over policies related to managing social housing (Ontario 2000a).

The Social Housing Reform Act (Ontario 2000b) not only initiated the devolution of housing responsibilities but also instituted fundamental

changes to the operations of each social housing community. From a policy perspective, the Social Housing Reform Act (Ontario 2000a) was intended to simplify, or converge, the different policies associated with the social housing system. The notion of policy convergence normally refers to the simplification and merging of state policies within a changing political system through a process of consolidation (Bennett 1991; Carroll and Jones 2000; Koebel, Steinberg, and Dyck 1998). Sousa and Quarter (2003a) have found that the Social Housing Reform Act initiated a fundamental shift in the identities of the co-operative housing and the public housing models in five specific areas: reporting structure; funding sources; low-income tenant selection; determining subsidy eligibility; and best practices.

According to Sousa and Quarter (2003a) the process of the convergence of the various housing policies has resulted producing a greater homogeneity within the social housing system and has placed the distinctive identity of the co-operative housing model at risk. Despite the convergence in the models, co-operatives still retain several areas of distinctiveness - for example, control over the housing charges for the non-subsidised units; control over their bylaws; discretion over the administrative practices such as hiring the staff; and capital planning - thereby ensuring autonomy of individual co-operative organisations.

A positive outcome of the convergence of the housing models is that public housing has increasingly adopted a number of best practices from co-operative housing - for example, increased contracting of the management and administration of individual public housing projects to the private sector. Sousa and Quarter (2003a) have found that the co-operative model has also influenced the decision to increase resident participation in the individual communities. A general manager of one of the larger local housing corporations stated that,

resident involvement is a very useful exercise and the level of participation found in non-profit housing is something we are trying to achieve. But, the co-op legislation gives too much responsibility to [the] members.

Resident participation in public housing is desired, but unlike co-operatives, managers of these projects often define participation as consultative as opposed to actual decision making.

There are indications from several

experimental programmes in Toronto that the local government housing agency is intending not only to increase the participation of residents of public housing but also to place a greater value on resident input, drawing it even closer to the co-operative housing model. First, in the Metro Toronto local housing corporation, residents of public housing projects are now electing two from their group to the board of directors. With approximately 60,000 households, the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (2003) is the largest local housing agency in Canada and one of the largest in North America. Second, through community-based budget planning residents are beginning to have input into establishing capital priorities for the entire government-housing portfolio. Increasing resident participation is a bold move for government housing organisations but not surprising given that the local housing corporations are no longer responsible only for public housing but for all forms of social housing, including housing co-operatives.

A third and even bolder move by the government-housing agency is a three-way partnership between the government, the co-operative sector organisation and public housing resident to convert public housing projects into co-operative housing communities. The test case has been the conversion of Alexandra Park in Toronto to the Atkinson Housing Co-operative. The original intent was to have the Atkinson become a typical co-operative, but the final model was constrained by the Social Housing Reform Act and a lack of clear understanding by government officials of the difference between public housing and co-operatives, and particularly what features can be adopted into the public housing setting.

Case Study: The Atkinson Housing Co-operative

The conversion of the Alexandra Park housing project into the Atkinson housing co-operative took place from 1992 to 2003 and balances public housing residents' need to have greater control over the fate of their community with the government's legal responsibility of maintaining a public asset.⁵ The Atkinson Housing Co-operative represents a unique three-way partnership between the government, a co-operative housing resource group and the co-operative members or residents. This section outlines elements that led to the

community becoming Canada's first public housing co-operative and indicates what the final model looks like.

The Atkinson Housing Co-operative opened in 1968 in downtown Toronto as one of the many public housing projects built in Canada from 1940 to 1975 (Rose 1980; Sewell 1994; Smith, 1995). The development was part of the City of Toronto's 1950s urban renewal plans, referred to as 'slum clearance' initiatives (Lapointe and Sousa 2003). The property has 410 units and it includes 140 apartments in two medium-rise apartment buildings and 270 townhouses. The community has always been geared to families, with 332 families and their children making up 81 per cent of the households. Seniors account for ten per cent of the households and singles and childless couples another 9 per cent (Lapointe and Sousa 2003).

The community has a tradition of being active. A Residents' Association was formed in 1976, known as the Alexandra Park Residents' Association (henceforth referred to as the Residents' Association), that represented the interests of the residents. The representative structure that formed the association became the precursor to the co-operative's board of directors. During the 1980s different social problems found in public housing projects, such as physical violence, prostitution, and drug activity, became more prevalent in Alexandra Park. Although the residents feared for their security, they endured the problems because they could not afford to rent or own housing in the private market. The government housing agency implemented various strategies to combat the growing rate of crime (Carder 1994); however, neither the residents nor the Residents' Association was consulted in a meaningful way. Consequently, there was a widespread belief among the residents that the housing agency was not effectively addressing their security needs.

In 1988 the president of the Residents' Association, Sonny Atkinson, worked with the local police division to improve the sense of security within the community. After several successful initiatives Sonny Atkinson and the local police convinced the government that the design of the project encouraged criminal activity and other social problems. As a result, several walls were demolished in the early 1990s. According to anecdotal accounts, the street patrols and tearing down the walls effectively reduced the levels of crime activity. For the residents the tearing down of the walls was a

symbolic action of the community trying to open itself to the wider neighbourhood. Another outcome of these initiatives was that by the end of the 1980s the notion of gaining control of the community emerged within the Residents' Association.

Sonny Atkinson often stated that the drug issue was the prime motivator that led to call for more local control. However, residents expressed other concerns related to a general lack of community cohesion. For instance, the residents were very concerned about security of tenure because the amount of rent was contingent on a household's income level. As a result, there was very little motivation to increase a household's income since it would lead to higher rents. This problem was compounded by a lack of stability in a household's income. There was also a general concern with security of tenure that if a household was under- or over-housed, due to a change in family size, the family would have to move to another community if an appropriate-sized unit was not available. This latter concern was greatest for older residents whose children had moved (Sewell 1994).

The Residents' Association was disappointed with the efforts of the housing agency to improve the quality of life and to keep the community safe. Sonny Atkinson also criticised the slow response to maintenance requests and argued that residents who had the ability to make some of the repairs should be paid for the work (Carder 1994). In response to the housing agency's perceived inertia and to a growing sense of fear and their lack of voice within the government-housing, in 1992 Sonny Atkinson started to openly call for local control over four key areas: maintenance; tenant selection; security procedures; and the maximum rent charged to residents. In essence, the Residents' Association believed that by increased tenant control in the management of the community, the residents would feel safer and a healthier community would emerge. Those calls were ignored, but the Residents' Association decided to seek a mechanism that would allow them to implement local solutions to the systemic social problems that existed in the community.

In 1992 the local member of the provincial parliament and a group of leading housing advocates and activists made the Residents' Association aware of two models that focus on resident control in the management of the community (Lapointe and Sousa 2003). The first model was tenant self-management, which is more common in the United States. Tenant self-

management gives some control to the residents, but the ultimate decision making rests within the government agency. The second model was to become a non-profit co-operative (henceforth referred to as co-operative), which is more common in Canada and Europe. The Residents' Association decided to pursue a conversion into a co-operative because the needs of the community converged with co-operative housing practices.

In the spring of 1993 representatives of the co-operative sector, local politicians and the community leadership held an information meeting for the residents. The purpose of the meeting was to inform the residents about co-operative living and how the community can become a co-operative. The outcome of the meeting demonstrated to the leadership that there was enough interest to officially embark on the goal of becoming Canada's first public housing co-operative (Lapointe and Sousa 2003).

With support in hand, Sonny Atkinson proceeded to work with an organiser from the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada to develop a plan to convert the Alexandra Park housing project into a housing co-operative. The plan combined community development activities and steps to establish the legal basis for the conversion to proceed. The plan had the support (in principle) from both the co-operative sector and from the government agencies that were involved. 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 in public housing. The co-operative sector supported the community's action because the conversion held out such great potential for co-operative housing. However, moving the plan from conception to implementation created unanticipated challenges and took more time than had been expected.

Since this conversion was the first of its kind in Canada, according to executive director of Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto (CHFT),

there was no blueprint. Every step had to be created based on existing conversion experiences ... while being sensitive to the uniqueness of public housing.

Therefore, dealing with unforeseen obstacles and great uncertainty became part of the conversion process. One 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 was hired as a support group and worked with the Residents' Association to raise the necessary funds to support the conversion.

A focal point in the conversion occurred in 1995 when in a community referendum 72% of the residents voted in favour of becoming a co-operative. The community leadership believed that the support was enough to gain a commitment from the government, but the government repeatedly introduced obstacles that challenged the residents' resolve, for example, delaying responses to proposals and insisting on a second vote. Despite the obstacles the community once again voted in favour of becoming a co-operative in 1998, this time with a 79% yes vote. According to the CHFT, 46% of the second votes were submitted in a language other than English, thereby demonstrating support across the different cultural groups.

After the second vote, the Atkinson co-operative board and the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto renewed their efforts with increased vigour to get government representatives to demonstrate support for the conversion. A working group of key 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 co-operative board felt that the discussions appeared to be more around the negotiations and less about a working group.

The membership of the would-be 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 co-operative (Metro Toronto Housing Corporation 2001). The co-operative membership is quite diverse and changes are representative of those in the public housing in Toronto. While ethnic diversity has always been a characteristic of the neighbourhood in which

Atkinson is situated, the diversity within the co-operative has become more pronounced in recent years. According to figures provided by the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto (2002) and from Lapointe and Sousa (2003), as of 1998 the five major non-English language groups accounted for 48 per cent of households.

The diversity has resulted in many challenges for the community leadership. Divisions along ethnic, cultural and even religious lines have emerged over the years, and those divisions are most noticeable during the elections. Residents have complained about ethnic bloc voting, though the evidence in support of this is not strong. Nevertheless, efforts to increase ethnic and language representation on the board of directors have been successful. At the present time the co-operative's board of directors is closer to being representative of the ethnic diversity of the community than ever before.

On 1 April 2003, the Atkinson Housing Co-operative became the first Canadian public housing project to convert into a co-operative. An important indicator of the conversion was the increase in member participation. The process led to many changes to not only how public housing is managed and maintained, but also how the co-operative model can be adapted to different circumstances. The outcome of this process has seen a new housing model develop, loosely referred to as a hybrid of public housing and of co-operative housing. This represents a major departure in the administration of a public housing project.

Distinctive Features of the Atkinson Housing Co-operative

The Atkinson Housing Co-operative is different from most housing co-operatives in that there is no income mixing; all members and non-members alike pay the housing charge on a rent-geared-to-income basis. The local government housing agency⁶ has input in creating the operating and capital budgets, thereby limiting the actual amount of control the members have in the overall decision making. Despite the differences, there are enough similarities to other housing co-operatives that Atkinson is considered to be a housing co-operative; however, Atkinson straddles the line separating co-operatives and public housing. There are three areas that distinguish the Atkinson from other public housing projects and housing co-operatives. Those areas are: the

relationship to the government housing agency; type of resident control; and the system of governance.

Relationship to the government housing agency

The original proposal in the business plan was to lease the property from the government and to operate the community as a typical co-operative. However, an operating agreement was deemed more appropriate because of the necessity to account for different stakeholder interests in the new model and in support of the community. The operating agreement was created according to five policies: first, the community needs to have a resource group (eg Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto) with which it associates itself, thereby providing the community with credibility. The motive behind the first policy was the recognition that public housing residents may not be capable immediately of operating a housing property and the expertise of the resource group will ensure that Atkinson co-operative operates in an accountable and transparent fashion.

The second policy is related to who establishes the rent ceilings, currently the government housing agency. This removes a key motivator of community building from the community's control. It is too early to ascertain the impact of this policy, but given past practices in public housing, the rents will often be quite high, thereby ensuring that members will not want to remain in the community. The third policy is that new tenants would come from an existing centralised waiting list, and they are required to become a member of the Atkinson Housing Co-operative. Using a centralised waiting list is now the standard for all government assisted housing properties, including co-operatives and non-profits, and Atkinson will continue to refer to that list for new members.

The fourth policy clarifies the sources of revenue that Atkinson can access. The Atkinson Housing Co-operative has access to the same sources of revenue as other co-operatives, but because Atkinson's members are all of low-income and have their rent linked to their income, revenue from the housing charges can vary from month to month. In that regard, Atkinson differs from other housing co-operatives, where there is normally an income mix and the revenues tend to be more stable and come from three sources: housing charges, rent subsidies for members with low-incomes, and small fees

associated with common services, such as parking and laundry.

The fifth policy specifies the process of developing and approving the operating budget, which is similar to that of other housing co-operatives 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. The expectation is that Atkinson co-operative will meet monthly revenue benchmarks set by the provincial Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Unlike other housing co-operatives, the final step is for Atkinson to negotiate and seek approval for the budget from the municipal housing agency. This extra step reflects a lack of confidence on the part of government in self-management by the residents. Once approved, there is a monthly payment from the municipal housing agency. These five policies served as guidelines for the final agreement between the Atkinson Housing Co-operative and the City of Toronto, and it will now serve as a template for other public housing projects that wish to convert into a co-operative.

There is one other significant characteristic (not directly related to the operating agreement) of Atkinson that distinguishes it from other housing co-operatives. It is common practice for housing co-operatives 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; operating surplus; and miscellaneous sources of revenue. Atkinson operates like other public housing projects in that there is no capital reserve and the municipal housing agency establishes and funds the capital priorities because Atkinson is a public asset. Not having a reserve fund limits the co-operative's 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 co-operative is expected to maintain it. There is one additional source of revenue for Atkinson in lieu of a capital reserve fund. The co-operative will be able to retain surplus funds from the operating budget in the community to be used for capital repairs.

The mechanism that the residents could access in order to call for capital improvements is that same process that other government-assisted housing properties will access. Specifically, the Atkinson membership is

encouraged to take part in participatory budgeting practices organised by the municipal housing agency. Participatory budgeting, a relatively recent innovation, allows for the input of tenants in public housing into the budgeting priorities of the municipal agency. Participatory budgeting is not particular to Atkinson, but is an addition to the process that the co-operative has for creating its own budget.

Type of resident control

Like other co-operatives, the members of Atkinson control the community through the creation and implementation of bylaws that set out the conditions for living and participating in the governance and the rights and responsibilities of the membership. An organisational by-law, which outlines the rules for membership, elections procedures, and evictions, has been established ensuring that the co-operative has a document outlining an elections process and an accountability structure. An occupancy by-law was also established, which is similar to a lease in that it outlines the standards under which individual members are able to reside in the co-operative. The process of establishing these bylaws involved the membership through committees and at a community meeting. Over time the community has created new bylaws intended to improve the living conditions for the entire community. Examples include conflict of interest, spending, maintenance improvement, parking, rent arrears, and rent subsidy.

System of governance

As described above, there are several differences between Atkinson and most housing co-operatives; however, the system of governance at Atkinson conforms to the norms for other housing co-operatives. The board of directors is the legal authority for the co-operative and is responsible to develop and approve any bylaws or legal agreements. Hence, the board makes all major policy decisions and seeks approval from the general membership.

The board of directors has 11 residents elected by the membership; however, a lack of knowledge and experience was a barrier to effective functioning. The Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto and the board of directors determined that one way to overcome any obstacles was to add three non-residents, appointed by the board, for two-year terms. The membership approved the addition of three

advisors with voting rights, even though many believe that it adds one more layer of accountability. Having non-resident advisors on a board differs from other housing co-operatives, but it is too early to determine the efficacy of this innovation.⁷

In addition to a democratically elected board of directors, the community has established a strong committee structure that provides opportunities for all members to participate in decision making. Despite numerous challenges and the inexperience of the membership in self-governance, the organisational 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. This has occurred even though the election of the Atkinson board and its related committee structure represent an increased level of responsibility foreign to residents in public housing. With the Atkinson Housing Co-operative, the leadership had to be more aware of issues and skilled at resolving them.

Analysis of the Atkinson Housing Co-operative

The conversion of Alexandra Park public housing project to Atkinson Housing Co-operative started when the residents decided over ten years ago that they wanted control over decision making. However, as demonstrated above, Atkinson Housing Co-operative is not a typical co-operative in that it remains within the public sector, all of its residents receive a housing subsidy, and its managerial prerogatives are more limited than for housing co-operatives in general.

Despite the differences, Atkinson is considered to be a co-operative because it has adapted key characteristics found in other co-operatives. For instance, the members elect from their group a board of directors that forms the legal governance of the organisation. The members also establish the various bylaws that enable them to determine key practices, such as elections and an eviction policy, within the community. The members of Atkinson also enjoy security of tenure not normally available to residents of public housing.

In Toronto, with approximately 160 housing co-operatives spread throughout the city, there

is a considerable public support for the co-operative housing model. However, the stigma associated with public housing persists because of the high concentration of low-income earners, a prevalence of social problems and the general design of the housing projects. The executive director of the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto stated that:

The motive behind the conversion is to improve the lives of the residents and the condition of the community. Although we will not immediately see all that we had hoped for in this conversion, the lives of the residents will gradually improve.

For many involved in the process, a sense of control and security of tenure will establish a feeling of hope by giving all members a reason to feel pride in their accomplishments.

Overall the main feature of the Atkinson Housing Co-operative is the impact that the model will have on the lives of the individual members and on the community at large. Co-operatives are most often associated with a social and moral agenda and Atkinson demonstrates that the co-operative model is not only resilient to political changes but it is also adaptable to different community settings.

Table 1 applies Ley's (1993) typology of rights in comparing the similarities and differences between the Atkinson Housing Co-operative and co-operatives in general. Ley (1993) adapts the

principles of co-operation (International Co-operative Alliance 2003) into a framework that translates those principles into a series of rights that members of a housing co-operative can expect to have. These rights are:

1. Security of Tenure.
2. Goals determined by the members.
3. Housing charges set by members and cover costs only.
4. Planning done by elected and accountable co-operative members.
5. Members set conditions of occupancy.
6. Information on planning and management accessible to and understood by all members.

As can be seen from the table, Atkinson possesses some characteristics of a housing co-operative and some of public housing. It is truly a hybrid structure.

One further benefit of the Atkinson experiment is the potential for reducing the costs associated with social housing. According to the original business plan (Atkinson Co-operative 1996) and sources close to the conversion,

by converting into a co-operative the government can immediately save about 15 per cent in administration costs.

In other words, even though this experiment can be interpreted as part of a tenant rights tradition,

	Housing Co-operatives	Public Housing	Atkinson Co-operative
Security of Tenure	Yes	No	Yes
Goals	Determined by the members	By housing corporation	Determined by the members
Setting housing charges or rents	Members and cover costs only	By housing corporation	By housing corporation
Planning	Conducted by elected and accountable co-operative member	By housing corporation	Conducted by elected and accountable co-operative member
Conditions of occupancy	Members	Government	Members and Government
Information on planning and management	Accessible to and understood by all members	Deemed not to be necessary	Accessible to and understood by all members

Table 1. Differences between the three housing models

it is viewed as creating efficiencies that are associated with smaller, more efficient government.

Looking ahead

The Atkinson Housing Co-operative is an innovation in public housing. The primary purpose of converting into a co-operative was to develop and implement local solutions to complex problems in a democratic and sustainable way. It is premature to determine how successful the new co-operative has been. The Atkinson Housing Co-operative will face many challenges in the future. The members of Atkinson share the desire to live in a healthy community, however, one of the challenges for the community will be to develop a stable membership by creating stronger sense of community by reducing the turnover normally found in public housing projects. The goal for many residents has been to move out as quickly as possible, and it is too early to determine whether becoming a co-operative will change that pattern.

Another challenge will be the negative perception associated with low-income communities. It is hoped that changes within Atkinson will have an impact on the external perception of the community. Several directors of the board and other members have established links with local agencies to address issues that concern residents within Atkinson and from the surrounding neighbourhood. It is too early to tell whether the Atkinson conversion will reduce the stigma, but these initiatives by Atkinson directors demonstrate the early stages of change.

The solutions are not always easy and it will take time and effort to see the desired outcome. As a co-operative they now have the social and structural means to ensure that change is sustainable. The key ingredients that have contributed to their path include: volunteer participation, commitment to community,

recognition of the challenges, and celebrating their achievements. The next step is to build on existing momentum. Some of the ideas have included innovation through Community Economic development and leadership training.

In closing, the Atkinson experiment demonstrates that the co-operative model is not adverse to change, but the model is designed to adapt to change and could be a fit for different settings. The Atkinson Housing Co-operative is the result of the combined vision and determination by the residents and the co-operative sector, particularly the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto, to see improvements to quality of life of public housing residents. Although the Atkinson Housing Co-operative has benefited from the altruism from the co-operative sector, according to several members, "we do not yet feel part of a movement." However, the experience at Atkinson will be invaluable for other public housing projects wanting to convert into a housing co-operative.

Sonny Atkinson was the leader most closely associated with the call for increased resident involvement at Alexandra Park. In 1997 the co-operative board 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 co-operative, the Atkinson Housing Co-operative. Unfortunately 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. The Atkinson Housing Co-operative remains unique in Canada, and it is being touted as a new model of social housing because of the hybrid arrangement that differs from other housing co-operatives but also differs from other public housing projects (Sousa and Quarter 2003b). The Atkinson case is being watched closely across Canada, as there are indications other provinces would like to introduce this model.

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Notes

- 1 The authors wish to thank the Kahanoff Foundation and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (file number 842-2000-001) for supporting this research. We also wish to thank the participants for agreeing to spend their valuable time to share their knowledge.
- 2 All references to co-operatives in this paper are to non-profit co-operatives.
- 3 In Canada there are four models of social housing. In this article the focus is exclusively on co-operative and public housing. The other two forms are non-profit housing: municipal non-profits and private non-profits. The distinction is based on the source of funding. Municipal non-profits are part of a government bureaucracy while the private non-profits are governed by private organisations.
- 4 The Ontario government agency associated with managing the public housing stock has had three different names and mandates over the years: Metro Toronto Housing Authority; Metro Toronto Housing Corporation; and more recently the Toronto Community Housing Corporation. In this case study the term housing agency will be used to refer to the government agency associated with providing public housing in Ontario.
- 5 The data used in this paper came from key participants in the conversion process (eg community leaders, government representatives) and from knowledgeable figures involved in the administration on non-market housing in Ontario. A variety of data collection methods were used, including semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and participant observation.
- 6 As of 2001, the housing came under the jurisdiction of municipalities and at this point a local housing agency representing the municipality of Toronto oversees Atkinson Housing Co-operative.
- 7 At the time of writing this article, the Atkinson Housing Co-operative had decided to withdraw support for maintaining the non-resident advisors.