

## A Book Review of Greg Suttor's 'Still Renovating'

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**Greg Suttor's new book on the history of Canadian social housing policy**

**By Nick Falvo**

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[Dr. Greg Suttor](#) is one of Canada's foremost authorities on affordable housing policy.

Currently a researcher at Toronto's [Wellesley Institute](#), he's just written a book titled [Still renovating: A history of Canadian social housing policy \(McGill-Queen's University Press\)](#).<sup>[1]</sup>



1. **The book provides a superb overview of the history of Canadian social housing policy.** Starting with Canadian housing policy at the end of World War II and ending

in 2013, readers won't find anything comparable to this book. It's an excellent overview that should be read by every person interested in Canadian housing policy. It includes lots of neat tidbits of knowledge that will be new even to people who've worked in the housing sector for decades. For example, the book states that: "The early 1990s recession was the first since the 1950s that did not see augmented social housing production funding as a significant form of federal stimulus (p. 116)." Also, in the early 1980s, Canada's minister responsible for the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation "had made his early career...opposing public housing (p. 116)." And "[housing first](#)" was prevalent in Ontario in the 1980s, two full decades before [Toronto's Streets to Homes program](#) came into being. All three of these tidbits are found in Chapter 5.

- 2. The book is interdisciplinary—few other authors could have been so comprehensive.** Suttor not only knows housing policy; he also understands the world. And his analysis of Canadian housing policy reflects this wisdom. The book includes a look at the roles played by, and perspectives held by, specific cabinet ministers; it also considers the role played by community advocates. The book's public administration angle includes a look at the role played by public servants and the importance of housing program design; it also includes a look at the role of [central agencies](#), as well as international influences on developments in Canadian housing policy. Finally, it makes inter-provincial comparisons of housing policy

within Canada. All of the above, considered over a span of approximately 75 years, is an impressive accomplishment for one author.

- 3. The book does a very good job of quantifying trends in housing policy and includes excellent visual representation of data.** Figure I. 1, titled “Annual social housing commitments, Canada, 1954-2011,” is a line graph that paints a succinct picture of the history of Canadian social housing. Table 8. 1, titled “Canadian social housing, 1949-1996: Key features of major programs,” is a ‘one stop shopping’ table that provides a helpful visual representation of the complex array of Canadian social housing programs discussed throughout the book. And Table 8.2, titled “Turning points in Canadian social housing: Summary of the social policy and housing/urban factors,” does a superb job of summarizing the contextual factors that led to important changes in the Canadian social housing landscape over the course of roughly half-a-century.
- 4. There are a great many uses for this book, including in academia, in government and in the social housing sector.** University courses taught—and dissertations written—in the following academic disciplines should seriously consider using this book: architecture, Canadian Studies, communication, economics, geography, history, journalism, planning, political science, public administration, public policy, social policy, social work and sociology. Public servants in the following departments and ministries (at all orders of government) should seriously consider reading it as well: health, homelessness, housing, municipal

affairs and social services. Staff working in any [central agency](#) in Canada should read this too, and so too should board members of social housing providers, as well as consultants.

5. **There are four sections of the book to which readers should pay particularly close attention.** They are: Chapter 3's consideration of the development of public housing (see subsection titled "The Social Integration Agenda"); Chapter 4's consideration of 'mixed income' housing (see subsection titled "Origins of the Community-Based Mixed-Income Model"); Chapter 4's consideration of community opposition to public housing (see subsection titled "Opposition to Public Housing"); and the first half of Chapter 8, which provides a 5,000-word summary of the entire book that's suitable as a reading on its own. These sections together provide an account and interpretation of those three important periods in a way that can't be found in existing, published sources.
  
6. **The book could have done a better job of explaining the rationale for government involvement in housing policy for low-income households.** There's a good deal of research that supports the need for government involvement in housing policy for low-income households. For example, we know that [health outcomes for persons experiencing homelessness are considerably worse than for the general population](#). We know that inadequate housing is a major factor resulting in the placement of children into the care of child welfare authorities (see [point #3 in this previous blog post](#)). We also know it can be [expensive for taxpayers to keep](#)

[people homeless](#). We know that [in most cases when homeless persons are provided with affordable housing and appropriate supports, they can maintain that housing](#).

Finally, we know [there's a strong case to be made for non-profit entities owning and operating housing for low-income households](#). But the book doesn't discuss any of this research; rather, it's as though the reader should understand from the outset why government should be involved in housing.

- 7. The book provides less attention to neoliberalism than I would have liked.** The book does an excellent job of making the case that housing policy doesn't happen in isolation; rather, government spending on housing for low- and middle-income households tends to reflect spending in other realms of public policy. And so, the book discusses the rise of annual spending on housing in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as its incremental decline beginning in the 1980s. It also makes the point that: "The market-minded orthodoxy in Ottawa was extreme in the 1990s (p. 133)." But *why* did this all happen? The book mentions some of the driving forces in passing, but doesn't provide as much attention to [neoliberalism](#) as I would have liked. Nor does the book discuss what could have prevented spending reductions in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>[2]</sup> Was this all inevitable? Were there alternatives? The book doesn't go there.

- 8. The book provides very little attention to the housing needs of First Nation, Inuit and Métis peoples.** There's brief mention of housing for Indigenous peoples in Chapter 4's subsection titled "Social Housing Programs in the First Non-Profit

Decade, 1974-85.” Likewise, Chapter 7 makes brief mention of homelessness among Indigenous people in Winnipeg. Yet, there are important developments that don’t get discussed. For example, the federal government first developed its on-reserve housing subsidy program in the 1960s, providing capital grants for both the construction of new units and the renovation of existing units— it did *not* provide funding to maintain those units once they were built, whereas the federal government *did* provide funding for ongoing maintenance for most of its social housing for the rest of Canada’s population at the same time.<sup>[3]</sup> Also, going forward, the issue of [expiring operating agreements for existing units of social housing across Canada](#) will affect units created under the [Urban Native Non-Profit Housing Program](#) much more than the rest of Canada’s social housing sector (that’s because Urban Native Non-Profit Housing units have been occupied by lower-income households, and have therefore been relying on deeper subsidies than most units in the rest of Canada’s social housing sector). The book doesn’t discuss this.

9. **I think the book should have provided more focus on housing in Canada’s**

**North.** In Canada’s North, construction costs are higher, housing deteriorates faster, and ongoing operating costs are higher. Much like housing units created under the Urban Native Non-Profit Housing Program (discussed in point #8 above) the future of social housing in Canada’s North is [much more insecure in the face of declining federal funding for social housing](#) than social housing in Canada generally

(Luigi Zanasi discusses all of these points in [this 2007 report](#)). The book doesn't discuss any of this.

**10. The book misses an important opportunity to provide critical analysis of co-op**

**housing.**In 1973, amendments were made to the [National Housing Act](#) that made it easier for groups of people to organize themselves into co-operative organizations to both build new co-op housing and to turn existing housing into co-op housing (by buying and renovating existing apartment buildings, for example).<sup>[4]</sup> Co-op housing is still prominent today; yet, many co-op housing developments didn't meet initial expectations. Many co-ops had 20-30 units each, and this created problems of scale (many of the small co-ops in Nova Scotia had volunteer bookkeepers, for example). In the 1970s, there was an expectation with new co-op housing that members would do a lot of participation; but this didn't pan out as planned, partly because a good deal of maintenance work requires specialized knowledge (i.e. the boiler on the roof of a large building). The book doesn't get into any of this.

**In Sum.** If you're interested in understanding the history of Canadian housing policy, [buy this very readable book](#), read it and keep it close to you for frequent reference. Also, follow Dr. Suttor's great work at the Wellesley Institute.

*The author wishes to thank Louise Gallagher, Kara Layher and one anonymous reviewer for invaluable assistance with this review. Any errors lie with the author.*

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Photo Retrieved from: [http://www.mqup.ca/still-renovating-products-](http://www.mqup.ca/still-renovating-products-9780773548152.php#!prettyPhoto)

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[1] Dr. Suttor recently wrote a short blog post about the book [which appears here](#).

[2] Pushing back against these spending cuts was precisely the goal of the [Alternative Federal Budget \(AFB\) project](#), which began in 1994 and is still going strong today.

[3] For more on this, see Devine, G. (2004). Chapter 23: Aboriginal Housing in Canada. In J. D. Hulchanski, & M. Shapcott (Eds.), *Finding room: Policy options for a Canadian rental housing strategy* (pp. 343-356). Toronto: Centre for Urban and Community Studies, University of Toronto.

[4] An excellent 23-minute documentary was made about co-op housing in 1975. More information about that documentary [can be found here](#). And a National Film Board study guide to accompany the film [can be found here](#).