

Suttor, Greg.

Still Renovating: A History of Canadian Social Housing Policy.

Montreal, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016.

328 pages.

ISBN 9780773548152

Still Renovating is a wonderful book and appearing at a very opportune moment. Housing is currently a major item of political interest, not to mention political controversy, stemming from the extreme housing costs particularly in Toronto and Vancouver. This brings together the politics of the wealthy and the politics of the poor and both of these find positive messages from the current federal government, wanting to get back to social spending and having electoral support from both the wealthy and the poor. The present government's support is also massively urban and this is a crucial factor, as Greg Suttor explains so well. Policy on social housing has been an intrinsic part of a federal urban policy, although of course rarely argued as such, given the always complicated federal-provincial relations and the mention of municipal institutions as falling under provincial jurisdiction in the British North America (BNA) Act. Given the short-lived conclusion to the only explicit federal effort to articulate a Canadian urban policy (the Ministry of State for Urban Affairs, created in 1964 and abolished in 1978-79). This federal policy failure certainly reinforced the provincial role and as Suttor demonstrates, this renewed provincial presence is one of the most important factors in the history of social housing policy in Canada.

The connected roles of the federal and the Ontario governments goes back to a number of major themes in Canadian urban development; the link between the federal government, both in politics and policies, with urban based capital and the related explanation about the greater development of secondary cities in Ontario as compared to Quebec's urban development owing to the stronghold of Anglophone Quebec capital situated very heavily in Montreal. These factors are crucial in explaining the Ontario government's creation and rapid activity of the Ontario Housing Corporation (OHC) in that Ontario was able to focus on building and managing the growth of the Toronto centered region (and therefore one factor in the shift from Montreal to Toronto as the dominant Canadian metropolis) but without creating much opposition from other Ontario urban centres as the OHC was happy to fund housing across the province. Suttor is therefore clear in focussing his story on the post-war economic prosperity in Canada, the immigration boom, and the resulting urbanization of Canada. Suttor's book will be both the definitive work on the history of Canadian social housing policy and also, an important contribution to the story of twentieth century Canada.

Keeping this focus on the larger changes in the political and economic context and taking account of prevailing ideas about relevant modes of state action and therefore situating the specific social policies that emerged, Suttor divides the period from 1949 to 2015 into 6 periods marked by different dominant actors, overall economic conditions, social programming, periods of expansion and periods of retrenchment, election results, regional differences, Quebec nationalism, indigenous housing. The 6 periods start with a federal law, the National Housing Act, then the entry of the provincial housing corporations (led in the first instance by Ontario), followed by community based programming. After this retrenchment sets in but is not uniform across the provincial governments and the federal government and here, once again, elections have sometimes made substantial differences (two examples, the Parti Québécois victory in Quebec and the NDP victory in BC).

Still Renovating is meticulously researched and combines this with an ability to draw out major broad themes; the welfare state, institutional momentum, public views about slum clearance and about the acceptability or not of homelessness, ideas both Canadian and worldwide and, finally, individual actors that have made a difference. Certainly a book to read and, more than that, a book to keep.

Caroline Andrew

Director of the Centre on Governance

University of Ottawa

Canadian Journal of Urban Research, Volume 27, Issue 1, page 59.

Copyright © 2018 by the Institute of Urban Studies.

All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

ISSN: 2371-0292