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Roofs & Roots' third way

Story by Sara Cassidy

On a glorious spring evening last month, Leslie Robinson and her partner shared a meal with me in their new Bay Street apartment. Boxes of books and kitchen stuff surrounded us, but Leslie carved out a small oasis under a window. A wooden table was set with bright placemats and a vase of tulips. The enormous salad at the centre seemed to vibrate, its various greens and Italian parsley so recently picked from Leslie's nearby community garden plot.

The apartment is Robinson's fifteenth since moving to Victoria 10 years ago. As a long-time renter, and as a Toronto tenant rights advocate for 20 years, she deeply understands the vulnerability of residential tenants; and so, in addition to her day job, she's an active member of Roofs and Roots, a Victoria housing cooperative currently shopping for its first building.

Simply put, people who live in co-operative housing have ownership-they may not own the building or the land, but they own the co-operative.

I was intrigued, first of all, by the group's name. Leslie offered her take: "As a renter, you get into a place and you don't feel like you have control over the situation, you don't feel like you've got roots down into the ground. But with Roofs and Roots...you put a roof over my head and you give me roots into the earth, and into the community," Leslie explains. "I lived in a house for almost five years and then the woman upstairs couldn't pay her cocaine bills, so her dealer moved in with her and before we knew it we were underneath all kinds of noisy night-time activity of selling the stuff and we had to move out. The landlord didn't really want to do anything about it."

Roofs and Roots was incorporated five years ago by a group of tenants who wanted personal stability and community involvement- they were well aware of the dire situation for renters in Victoria and wanted to change it. Generally, housing co-operatives are nonprofit ventures in which residents' monthly "housing charge" covers the building's capital costs. Traditionally, when the mortgage on the building is paid own, housing charges go down considerably. However, Roofs and Roots' vision is when the mortgage is paid, the housing charge stays the same, and the build up of equity goes toward new Roofs and Roots housing. "It is sort of for a bigger common good than just the people that happen to liver there," Robinson explains.

The holistic vision of social justice is the biggest difference between housing co-ops and middle class home buyers. Over the past five years, Victoria houses have "made" more money on the hot real estate market than their owners have earned in their jobs. For the owners it's sheer, undeserved luck. Housing co-op members

don't exploit that kind of luck. "Ownership gives you two things: it gives you control and investment. We [Roofs and Roots] get control without the individual investment. The benefit is the community's."

In most BC housing co-operatives, new members make a deposit—a kind of investment that they get back when they leave the co-op. That deposit is at least a couple of thousand of dollars, more often five or ten thousand dollars, "Robinson says, "And Roofs and Roots has said that's a barrier." The Roofs and Roots deposit is a possible \$500, plus 150 hours of what's called "sweat equity"—hands-on labour, from helping with renovations to baby-sitting for those helping with the renovations.

Roofs and Roots also distinguishes itself by keeping in mind the wider housing situation. "We've been looking at rooming houses that people are buying up and turning into condos, just getting rid of everybody who lives there. Roofs and Roots won't participate in taking housing away from a class of people that have it even worse Office Coordinator than we do," says Robinson. "But rooming houses, apartment buildings and houses are being bought up and turned into condos like crazy in Victoria. So what's happening is the supply of affordable rental housing or any kind of rental housing is dwindling and the vacancy rates are tighter than they've been in years. We would like to preserve some of that housing by turning it into a co-op. Or better still, purchase a big old house and turn it into apartments."

In their search for their first building, Roofs and Roots have consulted with real estate agents as well as their advisory board, which includes people from real estate development, property management, the Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre, the Co-operative Housing Federation of BC, and the Canadian Homebuilders' Association. They hope to find a place before it goes on the market.

"We're looking for a vendor. We have a link to getting charitable tax receipts, so if someone could sell us a house below market, we can give a charitable tax receipt for the difference." Robinson says.

"An ideal scenario would be a single person or even a couple who have lived in their house for years, their kids are gone, the house is bigger than they need, it's more work than they need, but they've got roots there. We would buy the house and turn it into apartments and that person or couple could move back in and live in one of the apartments." *And* reap the benefits of a community that is ecologically as well as socially committed. "That's part of the vision," says Robinson. "We're using recycled building materials—for renovations too—constructing and designing so that energy isn't wasted, making use of solar energy opportunities and also creating with garden in mind."

Robinson fondly remembers ten years in a 180-apartment co-operative high-rise in downtown Toronto. "We had a compost in the back, we had herb planters on the roof that we grew from the compost... We had a dozen units that were

wheelchair accessible so that people who lived in wheelchairs got involved in the co-op—heavily involved, disproportionately involved, because they didn’t have to travel anywhere to get involved in their community. The week we painted all the stairwells, the teenagers and the people who couldn’t speak English and go to meetings put in their work that way. We had Tai Chi in the building. We could do what we wanted.”

Robinson knows life on Bay Street won’t likely be so rosy. “If I wanted people to compost here [in her current building], I am totally at the will and the whim of the owners. Also, if I start talking to my neighbours, it’s a foreign concept to them, that we as tenants might get together and do something in common for ourselves.”

Well aware that Victoria is getting bought up by the wealthy, Robinsons says, “Some are buying their fourth or fifth home—somewhere they go to get some nice weather or to do some fishing. That’s not housing.”

“We can’t change that. We can only start carving out a little bit of an alternative model, first of all to protect ourselves, and second, to show it can work.” I left Robinson’s house hopeful, and with a bag stuffed with fresh Italian parsley.

If you’re interested in joining Roofs and Roots, or if you have a building for them, contact Sol Kinnis or Andrea Clark at 382-2124. For more information: www.roofsandroots.org. For information about co-operative housing check out the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada at www.chfc.ca

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