# Use It or Lose It: Toronto's "Abandonment Issues" Campaign for Affordable Housing

David Wachsmuth and Shiri Pasternak

## Abstract

The city of Toronto is suffering from "abandonment issues." A campaign of the same name seeks to help address the city's housing crisis through the introduction of a Use It or Lose It bylaw that would see abandoned buildings expropriated and converted to affordable housing. This article discusses the campaign, suggesting that the introduction of a municipal bylaw has radical potential to address the basic need for shelter. It describes a social approach to defining "abandonment" and argues that abandoned spaces can be used to challenge the North American private property regime, using Abandonment Issues as a case study.

## Image enclosed for full bleed

AI photo colour.jpg
AI photo bw.jpg
Caption: 4 Howard St.: one of Toronto's abandoned buildings, and the site of a 2006 housing occupation by the Women Against Poverty Collective
Credit: David Wachsmuth

## Introduction

Abandonment Issues is a Toronto-based coalition of housing activists fighting to get abandoned and underutilized buildings and spaces in the city turned into affordable housing through the introduction of a Use It or Lose It bylaw. The authors of this article are the coordinators of this project and are also current or former planning graduate students at the University of Toronto. This piece reflects some of the theoretical underpinnings of the collaboration, arguing that the introduction of a municipal bylaw has radical potential to address the basic need for shelter. We describe a social approach to defining "abandonment," and then discuss the context of the North American private property regime. We suggest that abandoned spaces can be a potent vehicle for activists to challenge the private property regime, and briefly describe the local context in which Abandonment Issues is attempting to do just this. We conclude by placing the Abandonment Issues campaign in the historical context of housing activism in Toronto.

## A Social Definition of Abandonment

Definitions of abandonment vary widely in academic and policy literature, but many simply reflect the data municipalities have available to them to track the issue (Cohen 2001; Accordino and Johnson 2000; Scafidi et al. 1998). The State of New Jersey, for example, defines a building as "abandoned" if it has been vacant for six months or more and shows some other significant sign of neglect, such as lack of maintenance or non-payment of property taxes (Mallach 2006). Simple empirical criteria such as these are useful for policymakers counting abandoned properties, but are lacking from an activist perspective, since they elide the social content of abandonment.

Abandonment is better conceptualized as an enactment—the product of social practices by means of which the borders of what is or is not abandoned are negotiated. Different social actors may disagree about whether a given space is abandoned, and will impute different meanings to the space. Perhaps the owner of a derelict apartment building thinks, "I'm not bringing in enough rent

to cover maintenance" and lets the building deteriorate or stops paying the property taxes; a tenant thinks, "I can't live in these conditions" and moves out; a city inspector decides that repairs are necessary or the building will be condemned; a squatter thinks, "this is a place I can live," and clandestinely moves in; a housing activist calls on the municipal government to convert the building to affordable housing. These claims and actions will vary from case to case, building to building, but it is through them that abandonment is enacted.

This argument implies that the definition of abandonment should not be limited to buildings that are vacant or in tax arrears. It is now occasionally recognized in the mainstream (Hillier et al. 2003) and critical (O'Flaherty 1996) literatures that abandonment is better thought of as a process or a cycle than as an on/off state. In some cases this extends as far as recognizing that buildings that are still occupied by tenants can still be considered abandoned. Hillier et al. (2003) distinguish between three dimensions of housing abandonment: financial, physical, and functional. *Financial abandonment* occurs when an owner discontinues property tax payments, perhaps because the property has accumulated negative equity. *Physical abandonment* occurs when the owner fails to maintain the building's physical condition, regardless of whether tenants remain. *Functional abandonment* occurs when a building ceases to be used. A row house in good repair, for which all property taxes are being paid, but which is boarded off and therefore vacant, is functionally abandoned. A building that is still occupied but no longer has mail service or utilities is likewise functionally abandoned to a certain extent.

These distinctions are helpful for understanding the different manifestations of abandonment, especially in the context of social practices that highlight the ambiguity inherent in abandonment. A building's owner can board up a building and thus functionally abandon it. But squatters who occupy the building reassert a use for it, and thus challenge that abandonment. Similarly, the community gardens that have flourished in the numerous vacant lots in New York City's Lower East Side (Schmelzkopf 1995) and the use (and resistance against the use) of public squares by homeless women and men (Crawford 1995) are contestations over whether these spaces are abandoned, and what that implies for their private and public use.

Even nuanced approaches to abandonment, which treat it as a multi-dimensional process rather than a single state, tend to conceptualize the process teleologically, with total vacancy as the endpoint (e.g. Mallach 2006; Hillier et al. 2003; O'Flaherty 1996). From a social perspective this is untenable; it makes no difference to the tenants of a rundown apartment building whether or not the building will one day be entirely vacant, and the practices through which the owner is abandoning the building would be the same in either case. This is a particularly important point in the context of public housing, which in Toronto, as elsewhere, is often in a deplorable state of repair. Except in rare cases, these buildings will remain full of low-income tenants with little choice but to accept poor but subsidized living conditions.[i] That vacancy rates may never reach 100 percent does not change the fact that the public housing agency is abandoning the buildings.

In Toronto, the name Abandonment Issues is in part an attempt to provoke a new understanding of housing abandonment. Abandonment issues usually refer to emotional trauma; psychologically, abandonment is neglect, an evasion of responsibility, an active disregard for others or the embodiment of that disregard. By calling a building abandoned, we invoke emotional turmoil in the public sphere. Although the name Abandonment Issues is tongue-in-cheek, this approach has been effective at calling upon people to see themselves as participants within a civic sphere where certain responsibilities are incumbent upon its citizens. An abandoned building provokes a moral

response ("something should be done") where a vacant building does not. Framing abandonment as a moral issue is important for the project as a means of coalition building, because the aim is to challenge private property rights.

**Housing and the Colonial Origin of Property Rights**

Private property is not simply keeping something in one's possession. As we will see, property regimes are intimately connected with political governance, since the legitimacy of national sovereignty claims rests in large part on the state's protection of citizens' rights to material possessions. But property rights also structure immediate relations among individuals and between individuals and society, producing political geographies by defining the division between public and private spheres. The right of the state to negotiate and enforce private property laws is often seen as intrinsic and impartial to the operations of government, but examining the social nature determining how property should be protected raises crucial political questions about the distribution of resources in society. Abandonment Issues seeks to bring to light the ways in which property transactions are deeply social and political—from both the perspective of the evolutionary logic of legal institutions and the rise of commodity capitalism.

Although the American legal tradition cuts off its own history at republican confederation or even later, the roots of the private property system in North America—and the forms of domination it legitimates—are buried in the continent's colonial origins (Katz 1984). John Locke (who, in addition to being an English political philosopher, was a plantation owner in Carolina) developed and articulated his influential ideas of property in response to the particular context of justifying colonialism in the New World. To begin a North American legal history with Locke is to acknowledge that the protection of private property rights underlies the unique role of government and the specific conditions of sovereignty on the continent. Locke's (1988) argument for land entitlement, for example—when we mix our labor with the land, making improvements to the productive capacity of the soil, we may enclose the commons for ourselves—helped form the philosophical basis for the American Revolution, since Locke's case for privatizing property is an argument that undermines the authority of the Crown, conferring new forms of sovereignty on settlers.

Bryan (2000, 12) argues that, according to Locke's logic, "the concept of property thus evolves to where one is entitled to something by virtue of one's labor in subjecting something to one's domain." Bryan refers here to objectifying nature, but as Cohen (1927, 13) wrote 80 years ago, "dominion over things is also *imperium* over our fellow human beings." Although property ownership is couched in the language of fundamental natural rights to self-preservation and is not an explicit argument for capitalist accumulation, through capitalism it has been reduced to the specialized purposes of transaction and production. A social order predicated on the fungibility of everything—from land to genes to blood lines—led to the emergence of a rationalist, determinist, private ownership model, and property became increasingly separated from moral questions of appropriate allocation. In the feudal and mercantilist systems, lords reigned over populations by virtue of monopolies over land—no better than capitalism, but an explicitly moral framework. When land was commercialized and "freed" from this hold, the state became the intermediary in the relation between owners and workers (through regulatory apparatuses), although this sovereign power over non-propertied classes was naturalized and therefore hidden from view. According to Polanyi (1957), the subordination of labor, land, and money to the market mechanism also subordinates the substance of society, since these elements are transformed from life forces into

(fictitious) commodities through their detachment from the rest of life; the *propertizing* techniques of these elements also form the grounds of legitimacy for political power.

The real estate market does not generally prompt questions about the authority by which housing allocation is governed through exchange, or why some people have homes and others do not. But critical geographers have found this neglect problematic. For example, Blomley (2004) spends an entire book painstakingly showing the ways in which the property market, including real estate, is based on a kind of false consciousness of law. The foundation of this false premise is what Blomley calls the "ownership model" of property that presumes a discrete individual with an exclusive right to possess a thing. Blomley criticizes this model for presenting property "as fixed, natural, and objective, transforming 'the contingency of social history into a fixed set of structural arrangements and ideological commitments'" (ibid., 5; internal quotation is A.C. Hutchison). When the "stability" of law meets the rational abstraction of space, as depicted by property law, planning is expunged of its political and social content.

Although scholars have long disputed the mythology that property is a *thing* owned, rather than a "bundle of rights" or a matriculation of capital (Grey 1980; Marx 1975), the reality is that most people live easily under the assumed premise that property ownership is a stable and unequivocal institution. An important role for property activists is to denaturalize this assumption that property is a thing as opposed to a social relationship. Property relations do not simply describe how things are owned, but rather in so doing they refer to our relations to each other and to the world around us (Bryan 2000). In the context of shelter, the decision as to who should rightfully have homes is determined not simply by a speculative housing market, but by the politically determined laws of our society that govern these relations of exchange.

**The Challenge Abandonment Poses to Property Rights**

Abandonment can be a strategic place to push against the dominant property regime, because it creates a space for questioning the ownership model that underlies this regime. Blomley (2004) describes how, through the ownership model, private property is constructed as the hegemonic expression of property relations, such that forms of collective ownership that persist in capitalist society are ontologically subordinated to private ownership (the state's claims against private property are presumptively invalid) and even ontologically constructed *as* private ownership (the state, or a corporation, is a fictive individual). The ownership model tends to limit the "legitimate" circumscription of property rights by state or other forms of collective control. Private property rights, generally speaking, are not contingent on the owner performing a social function (Macpherson 1978). The presumptive guideline is: 'It's my land and I can do what I want with it.'

Karl Klare (1979) has suggested that law is "constitutive" of politics; law makes certain kinds of politics possible, and certain kinds of politics likely (see also, more recently, Brigham and Gordon 1996). A property regime, as a legal complex, is similarly constitutive (Brisbin and Hunter 2006). In the standard ownership model, urban space is presumed to be totally accounted for, unambiguously divided, and privately or pseudo-privately owned (Blomley 2004). The potential for making collective claims on urban space is correspondingly diminished. This is the case in public as well as private space, since under the ownership model the state both behaves and is treated as another private interest. But what if we challenge these boundaries between public and private? What if we inject into the codes of property ownership conduct a new moral responsibility clause—here

represented by the Use It or Lose It bylaw, which we discuss below—that redefines "abandoned" properties as "public" space?

Abandoned spaces are sites where the smooth functioning of the property regime has visibly broken down, and so they are also sites of opportunity for challenging the politics of the property regime. In the liberal imagination, private property (or public property, vested in the hands of the pseudo-private state) is meant to ensure the best use and care of the land and therefore to contribute to the greater social good. When buildings are neglected and left to rot away—either because of predatory real-estate speculation or because of regional economic decline—or when public parks fall into decline, the whole regime is called into question as the presumed ethical foundation collapses. The ownership model is uncoupled from the greater social good. Abandonment thus provides activists with a potential avenue for mobilization: many people who would otherwise accept the way private property rights are conferred and enforced in North America are inclined to see abandoned buildings as problems calling for intervention. The call will not be inherently progressive—it may be to "clean up" a public square by dislodging homeless people sleeping there—but it provides an opening for progressive action.

## The Toronto Case

The abandonment problem varies greatly from city to city, and one reason why mobilization around this issue in Toronto has been so successful may be, paradoxically, the fact that the city has so few abandoned buildings. Our investigations have uncovered fewer than 50 buildings so far, and we believe the total number in the city is not more than a few hundred. Using Hillier et al.'s (2003) terminology, these are all functionally or physically abandoned; they are fully or partly vacant, boarded-up, or in poor repair. Very few are financially abandoned; in almost every case, the owner is unambiguous and continues to pay property taxes.

There are likely a number of reasons that Toronto has so few abandoned buildings, but the most important is the long-term and continuing strength of its property market. Toronto did not experience the downtown decline so typical of American central cities in the post-War period, and its property market has largely withstood the deflating real estate prices now being experienced by the "housing bubble" cities on the east and west coasts. Property values throughout the city, but particularly in the downtown, have climbed high enough that few owners leave their buildings unoccupied, and unwilling owners generally have little trouble selling.

The result is that the problem of abandonment seems solvable in Toronto in a way that it might not in cities like Detroit and Philadelphia that have tens of thousands of abandoned buildings.[ii] Leaving aside single-family residences tied up in inheritance disputes and unused government lands, abandoned buildings in Toronto are generally either boarded-up buildings owned by developers hoping eventually to demolish the structure and redevelop the site, or derelict buildings whose owners do not have the capital to make necessary repairs. Since these abandoned sites are sprinkled throughout the city rather than concentrated in one neighborhood, they do not evoke the sense of hopelessness that might be expected to accompany entire city blocks that have fallen into ruin. For many Toronto residents, who might not otherwise be politicized but are suffering from the effects of city's speculative property market, these sites represent the tangible possibility of housing and community centers rather than the symptoms of inexorable neighborhood decline.

Municipal governments have generally been far more proactive in addressing abandonment in the United States than in Canada (likely due to the greater severity of the problem), but grassroots abandonment activism might be more difficult in American central cities because the problem appears so intractable and immune to small-scale responses. On the other hand, Brigham and Gordon (1996) describe a vibrant housing movement in New York City in the 1980s and 1990s that mobilized around abandoned buildings in various ways. One example was an "anti-warehousing" campaign, warehousing being the practice of landlords deliberately emptying their buildings of tenants and maintaining them vacant as a prelude to changing their property status. The campaigners' slogan—"Warehousing is a crime"—used abandonment to simultaneously challenge the legal basis of property norms and invoke a moral claim for more affordable housing. The Abandonment Issues project in Toronto is following a similar strategy.

## The Abandonment Issues Campaign

### *Use It or Lose It and the Case for Expropriation*

The centerpiece of the Abandonment Issues campaign is an effort to get the City of Toronto to adopt a Use It or Lose It bylaw, which would see abandoned buildings converted by the City into affordable housing. In American cities, where large numbers of buildings have fallen under municipal ownership through property tax delinquency, such a proposal would mainly be a question of funding. But in Toronto, where abandoned buildings still have recognized owners who pay their taxes in hopes of developing condominiums or selling the land once property values have increased sufficiently, this proposal implies overriding private property rights through expropriation.

The municipal power to expropriate in Canada is similar to eminent domain in the United States, but, since Canadian municipalities are creatures of the provincial governments and have no independent legal existence, it is governed by provincial legislation. In the case of Toronto, the legislation is the 1990 Ontario *Expropriations Act*, which gives a municipality the authority to expropriate private property in their jurisdictions (s. 5.1a) if doing so is "fair, sound and reasonably necessary in the achievement of the objectives of [the municipality]" (s. 7.5), subject to the approval of a provincial inquiry officer (s. 7). Like with eminent domain, Ontario municipalities must compensate the former owner by paying a fair market price for the expropriated property.

Although no such legal distinction is made, it is useful to distinguish broadly between what could be called city-building expropriation and social expropriation. City-building expropriation is driven by a plan or vision for a large-scale land use (e.g. a highway or a large public edifice), and requires the seizure of private land as a means to securing this end. Historically, this has been the dominant context for expropriation in Canada and eminent domain in the United States, including municipal economic redevelopment projects undertaken following the U.S. Federal Housing Act's 1949 stipulation that municipalities could use eminent domain for the redevelopment of blighted neighborhoods, upheld by the Supreme Court in *Berman v. Parker* (1954) and recently reaffirmed in *Kelo v. City of New London* (2005).

Social expropriation—much rarer—is a small-scale response to a particular situation, usually a "crisis" in the existing land use. Some municipal applications of eminent domain, particularly in states that permit the power to be used to counter "spot blight" (i.e. individual rundown properties, regardless of whether they are located in a redevelopment area) qualify as social expropriation, but these are relatively rare. Nevertheless, social expropriation serves as a crucial context in which to

pose the question of who has legitimate authority to contravene private property rights. While normally only the state's interests are deemed worthy to trump those of private property owners, the Use It or Lose It model, if adopted, would assert the same right for our communities, and in particular for those suffering without adequate housing.

In 2006 a single social expropriation occurred in Toronto: a former rooming house on the major thoroughfare Queen Street West that had been damaged in a fire in 1998 and stood vacant ever since was expropriated by the municipal government. This building is now in the process of being redeveloped as affordable housing by the Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre (PARC; a nearby non-profit community center and a member of the Abandonment Issues coalition) with federal and provincial subsidies. This case is an example of what could be done throughout the city, and the model for the Abandonment Issues campaign. By expropriating the vacant building, the City set an inspiring precedent for the expropriation of private property for the explicit social aim of providing more affordable housing in Toronto.

The circumstances that led the City to use their powers of expropriation in this way, however, were far from straightforward. Victor Willis (2008, 2007), the Executive Director of PARC, describes the desperate situation of people living in the building (1495 Queen Street West, directly next door to PARC) following its purchase in 1981 and conversion to a rooming house. Each apartment cost around $450 per month, but there were few working washrooms and the rooms were tiny, cold, and depressing. In 1998 the building caught fire and two people perished in the flames. The building sat derelict for eight years, not just an eyesore and reminder of the tragedy that had occurred but also, "a community asset of potential affordable housing that was wasting away" (Willis 2007).

The neighborhood had elected a new city councilor in 2003, and members of the community began pressuring her to take action on 1495 Queen Street West. Two years later, in February 2005, the City passed a wide-ranging policy on housing and homelessness, which, among many other provisions, called for a working group to "identify unused or derelict publicly and privately owned buildings and land suitable for development or conversion to supportive, transitional and affordable housing use" (City of Toronto 2005, 6). The councilor identified the building on Queen Street (apparently the only privately owned building brought forward) and expropriation proceedings were initiated. After the provincial government, which has approving authority over all expropriations, allowed the expropriation to continue, the landlord managed to win a reprieve at the City's executive committee, and a community meeting was held to discuss redevelopment possibilities. At this meeting, the landlord presented photocopied site plans overwritten with magic marker.

Community members at the meeting expressed an overwhelming desire for the building to be taken away from the landlord, and following a cross-city lobbying effort led by PARC, Council decided to proceed. A bidding process, only open to non-profit charitable organizations, was arranged and PARC won the contract to redevelop the property into affordable housing.[iii] The new housing units will be rebuilt by survivors of mental illness and named after Edmond Yu, a young man with mental health issues who had a "fatal interaction" with the police when living on the streets due to an eviction from that very property (Willis 2007, 2008).

The challenge for Abandonment Issues is that this expropriation was the result of a remarkable conjuncture of circumstances that could have been subverted at any number of points. If the landlord had bothered to obtain strong legal representation or presented credible redevelopment

plans, if the City had not recently introduced a policy for identifying abandoned properties, if the councilor had not felt community pressure to take action on the building, or if PARC had not advocated effectively, it is likely the building would not have been expropriated. The fire in 1998 had also confronted residents with the stark violence of poverty; when the community witnessed the removal of two body bags from the ravages of the fire, even typically conservative and reactionary actors were outraged by the injustice.

The example of 1495 Queen Street West is thus not easily replicable, and is an uncertain model for creating affordable housing. There are other potential shortcomings to the expropriate-and-redevelop approach. These include the enormous financial risks of undertaking these developments, which rest entirely on the shoulders of the non-profit charitable organizations, and the way that affordable housing building subsidies provided by the provincial and federal government impose considerable restrictions on how many units of housing can be built, as well as on their size. Since current affordable-housing subsidies in Ontario are meted out per-unit, rather than calibrated according to apartment size, a cost-benefit analysis privileges single-dwelling apartments to the detriment of young families and single parents.

Still, Abandonment Issues believes the expropriation approach, embodied in a Use It or Lose It bylaw, is worth pursuing. On the one hand are the arguments made above about using abandoned buildings to mount a challenge to private property rights. On the other hand is the fact that the community itself identified the building and made explicit their definition of "affordable housing." The Parkdale Residents' Association—supporters of the expropriation—called this process "consensual planning." At the time of the expropriation of 1495 Queen Street West, a local newspaper reported, "PRA president Craig Peskett hopes that this community-based decision-making will avoid any more 'erroneous decisions made by governments, developers and service agencies'" (Bilton 2006, no page number available).

*The History of Use It or Lose It in Toronto*

The Abandonment Issues campaign builds on the work of a number of Toronto anti-poverty organizations demanding Use It or Lose It legislation. The common thread of this housing activism hinges on the strong belief in the right of all people to affordable shelter and their related right to act for themselves to win this right, through struggle if necessary. This belief is underpinned by an analysis of the structural inequalities and injustices of liberal capitalism. While Canada's social welfare system may be highly regarded in Michael Moore's documentary films, the reality on the ground is much starker. Statistics Canada shows that, despite "an unparalleled period of economic expansion" in recent years, the country is increasingly characterized by "stark economic contrasts between the affluent and a growing swath of working poor" (Yalnizyan 2007, 4). Canada has a particularly poor record in the area of housing, unique among wealthy Western nations for lacking a national housing plan. Recent years have seen, in particular, the deterioration of the position of low-income households in the rental sector—no surprise, given that Canada has the most free-market approach to housing in the West, and the second lowest rate of social housing after the United States (Hulchanski and Shapcott 2004). An additional worrying trend in Toronto over the last few decades has been the disappearance of mixed-income neighborhoods in the face of the increasing spatial segregation of the working poor (overwhelmingly immigrants) in the city's inner suburbs and the wealthy in the downtown, what David Hulchanski (2007, 1) has called the "three cities within Toronto."

This is the context in which activists in Toronto have campaigned in recent years for affordable housing for all. The specific demand for a Use It or Lose It bylaw is one that the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP), a Toronto-based direct action anti-poverty organization, has been making for over a decade (OCAP 2002). Citing the number of homeless people in the streets, the growing list of families waiting for safe, affordable shelter in the city, and the lack of government funding and interest, OCAP drafted a Use It or Lose It bylaw in 1997, revising it in 2002 for a housing occupation called the Pope Squat, timed to coincide with Pope John Paul II's visit to the city. According to some accounts, it was the Pope Squat of 2002 that led City officials to promise to catalogue all abandoned buildings downtown (Cohen 2002), although this cataloguing never occurred.

Later in 2002, on October 26, a national call to action, issued by OCAP, went out across Canada to "Give It or Guard It"—telling governments to either turn over vacant buildings to affordable housing or be prepared for housing occupations. Activists in Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Guelph, and Vancouver collectively demanded that all buildings sitting vacant for six months or more be converted into affordable housing, and they participated in a number of high-profile housing occupations to make their intentions clear (Keenan 2002). Toronto's march for the Give It or Guard It action began at Tent City, an unused lot owned by Home Depot where over 100 homeless people—Canada's largest homeless encampment—had braved the elements for years to construct and inhabit makeshift housing until they were evicted only one month before the action.

On June 3, 2006, an activist group called the Women Against Poverty Collective (WAPC) initiated another housing occupation in the east end of Toronto's downtown, although police quickly suppressed it. Arguing for the necessity of linking anti-poverty organizing with the struggle to end violence against women, WAPC supports a Use It or Lose It bylaw because it is a straightforward solution to the particularly desperate housing situation faced by women, children, and transgendered people in the city. One in five Canadian women lives in poverty, and fifty percent of all women in the country will be victims of violence (Plyler 2007). These numbers are implicated in an urgent and *gendered* housing crisis. WAPC member Jennifer Plyler points to the cycle of violence women in poverty endure: women in abusive situations often have to escape their homes with nothing, and since they often cannot subsequently afford to support themselves, they end up back in abusive relationships, trading sex for shelter, or constantly on the move.

WAPC has been both an inspiration and an important ally in the Abandonment Issues campaign. Squats, after all, as Plyler points out, have been a primary method of gaining safe spaces for women. The first women's shelter in the world was a squat in London, England, opened in 1971 by Erin Prizzey in a vacant church. Police, instead of shutting down the illegal operation, kept referring more women there because it was the only safe place for battered women escaping abusive husbands to go. That church space is now the Cheswick's Women's Aid (Fincham and Bradbury 1990). For WAPC, women's homes run by women for women are the solution. As Plyler described in a 2007 radio interview, "two thirds of women who go into the shelter system go back to abusive situations because the welfare rates do not allow them to survive [on their own]."

The Abandonment Issues coalition is now building on the work done by groups such as OCAP and WAPC, and is supported by members of both of those organizations and a number of other Toronto anti-poverty groups, community service agencies, and think tanks.[iv] The City of Toronto (2007) is drafting a new affordable housing framework to guide its actions over the next 10 years, and Abandonment Issues intends to get Use It or Lose It included in that framework.

Establishing continuity with previous housing campaigns in the city is an important part of the strategy for doing so.

*Mapping*

Abandonment Issues has aggregated research of abandoned properties onto a map of Toronto. As the Institute for Applied Autonomy (IAA) points out, there is long tradition of using mapping to highlight relationships of power, control, and spatial practice. Calling their own practices *tactical cartography*, IAA (2007, 29) defines this alternative interpretation of landscapes as "spatial representations that confront power, promote social justice and are intended to have operational value." The operational value of the Abandonment Issues map is to create a crisis in what has yet to be publicly defined as a problem: abandoned properties, and more crucially, their link to the need for affordable housing. IAA (2007, 35) states, "Maps don't merely represent space, they shape arguments; they set discursive boundaries and identify objects to be considered." The Abandonment Issues map is unique to the city because it is the only representation of the extent of the abandonment issues facing Toronto. Abandonment Issues campaign also discursively shapes the project as mapping *missing* affordable housing, providing a tangible new view of the city in terms of wasted space and potential regeneration. The Abandonment Issues campaign is helping to both define the problem and offer a socially just solution. Furthermore, this is a collective mapping project, since in the absence of any municipal database it largely relies on the participation of citizens for tips on abandoned properties. At the campaign launch, attendants were invited to participate in the mapping by placing pins (color-coded to represent different types of abandonment, ranging from totally vacant to under-occupied) on a large map of the city or contributing suggestions to the "tip" jar.

Mapping the city's abandoned spaces presents an opportunity to consider the field of power within which these abandoned properties are embedded. The next step is to create a website where people can add virtual pins to an interactive map and compare the distribution of abandoned buildings and spaces with socio-economic and demographic data from the census to attain a clearer view of Toronto's abandonment issues. Since abandonment is not limited to housing but is tied to larger structural and systemic inequalities, such comparisons also paint a picture of neglect that correlates with broader patterns of injustice.

**Conclusion**

While a Use It or Lose It bylaw is a tangible step towards affordable housing in the city, it is admittedly only one small solution to a complex and many-headed problem. Even if the bylaw is adopted by City Council, there is currently $0 in the City's Land Acquisition Fund—the source from which the City would likely draw funds to purchase abandoned properties on the market. At the moment, the City does not even have the necessary funding to maintain its current stock of social housing, let alone to finance new affordable housing to supply all of the current demand. In this sense, there is an argument to be made that a push for squatting rights would make more economic sense as a short-term solution to Toronto's housing crisis than a Use It or Lose It bylaw. But there are nearly 70,000 households on the waiting list for social housing in Toronto, and many of them are single-mother families, so we have made secure, safe, and stable housing our policy priority. Despite the City's lack of funding to acquire buildings at this point in time, developing an institutional framework for social expropriation may help activists in the future to assert community ownership over wasted urban infrastructure.

David Wachsmuth received his master's degree in planning from the University of Toronto in 2008. His research interests include housing policy and urban political economy. Shiri Pasternak is a PhD candidate in planning at the University of Toronto. She is the moderator of www.propertytaskforce.org and her research interests include "the commons" and decolonizing approaches to land-use planning. Wachsmuth and Pasternak are co-coordinators of Abandonment Issues (www.abandonmentissues.ca).

## Notes

[i] A local exception was exposed in a recent Toronto media report that identified fifty single-detached houses owned by Toronto's public housing agency but were unoccupied for lack of funds to pay for necessary repairs (Bradshaw 2007).

[ii] Comparing the number of abandoned buildings between cities is difficult nearly to the point of futility, thanks both to limited municipal resources dedicated to the task and to the wide variety of operational definitions of abandonment. Still, Mallach (2006) compiles a range of figures for "weak market" cities in the United States; recent estimates for Detroit range from 10,000 to 39,000, and for Philadelphia from 26,000 to 54,000. In contrast, Pagano and Bowman (2000) estimate that San Antonio, a city of roughly the same size as Detroit and Philadelphia, has only 3,000 abandoned buildings.

[iii] The auction was part of a larger tender by the City for the development of affordable housing, and was quite competitive.

[iv] A complete list of participating organizations is available at www.abandonmentissues.ca

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